

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY PRESENTS



THE BLACKGAARD CHRONICLES™



BOOK FIVE

KNIGHT'S SCHEME



PHIL LOLLAR

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*For
Bob, D. J., and Jerod*



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CHAPTER one



It was late. The streets were deserted, which wasn't unusual for that part of Odyssey at that time of day, especially after what had happened there last week. A car pulled into the parking lot of what ten days ago was a thriving business and the newest hit entertainment attraction in town but was now the burned-out shell of a building.

The car rolled across the lot and parked on the far side of the shell, out of view of the street. Its occupant, a stocky, neatly dressed man with thick, longish white hair, large round glasses, and a rather bushy white mustache shut off the engine and lights, exited the car, and headed toward the scorched ruins, moving with a slight limp.

John Avery Whittaker thought about recent events as he walked toward what used to be Blackgaard's Castle. Richard Maxwell, the young man who had caused the fire that destroyed it, was under arrest and locked up in jail. Maxwell had nearly died in the fire thanks to his boss, the owner and the place's namesake, Dr. Regis Blackgaard.

It was Dr. Blackgaard who caused Maxwell to be pinned under an arcade video game. According to Maxwell, Blackgaard and his cat then disappeared *into* the burning building. That's the reason

Whit was there—well, *one* of the reasons. He needed answers to a good many questions.

He strode up to where the front doors of Blackgaard's Castle used to be and then slipped through them into the smoky wreckage. Though the walls were still in pretty good condition, the ceiling was a total loss, as were all of the games and machines inside. Their blackened shells stood like tombstones, silent monuments to better days, even if they were brief.

Whit clambered over heaps of ceiling debris and around the charred wrecks of the games and finally reached his destination: a door marked "Private." It, too, was seared, and the sign on it now read "Pri . . te." Whit tugged on it, and the door opened rather easily. He pulled a flashlight from his pocket, slipped inside the door, and descended the stairs.

The flames had not reached the basement, though there was still a strong smell of smoke. Water from the fire engines and hydrants had trickled down the stairs and onto the floor of the corridor that stretched before Whit, leaving the area dank.

Both the police and fire departments had searched down here, but no trace of Blackgaard or his cat had been found in the hallway or in any of the rooms. They assumed Dr. Blackgaard had gotten out a different way upstairs, but Whit suspected otherwise. Lucy, a young friend of Whit's who'd frequently visited Blackgaard's Castle, had told him about an encounter she had down here and her discovery of an oddity in the wall.

Stacked boxes on both sides of the hall formed a kind of maze. Whit maneuvered around them, checking them as he went. Most were completely empty. Then about halfway down the corridor, he came to a stack that wasn't empty. Whit pushed the boxes over, and the top box split open. Out spilled an odd assortment of old newspapers and magazines. A quick check of the other boxes in the stack showed they contained the same. There was nothing valuable

about the contents, but the boxes were heavy and could not be easily moved. It was as if they'd been stacked to hide what was behind them.

Sure enough, when Whit examined the wall behind the stack, he confirmed Lucy's discovery: the outline of a door. It was very faint; you would have to be really looking for it to see it or run your fingers over it, as Lucy had, to find it. But moving the boxes revealed more: The door and a bit of the wall around it had been recently plastered.

Whit cleared away the toppled stack and examined the door. It had no knob or handle. Whit pushed on it, but it wouldn't budge. He traced the outline of the door with his light and finally found what he was looking for: At the bottom left of the door, right at the floor, a small screw protruded from the wall. Whit tried toggling it in all directions, but it wouldn't move. He pulled on it; again, nothing. He then pressed it into the wall and was rewarded with a metallic *click*. He pushed on the door again, and this time, it opened easily.

Whit stepped through the doorway and shone his flashlight around the space inside. It hadn't really been affected by the fire that had raged above it. The room was filled with lab tables and accoutrements, mainly of a chemical nature—beakers and tubes and burners. Some were broken, but most hadn't been touched; indeed, much of the equipment was still in boxes. Curiously, though, the company names on all of the boxes and equipment had been either scratched off or marked over.

Nothing stood out to Whit, except for one small box sitting on a table. He could still make out some of the letters of the company name on it: “. . . ebit . .”

Strange. He pulled out a notepad and pen and copied down the letters as they appeared, spaces and all.

He made a perimeter search of the room but found very little until he came to a spot almost directly opposite the entrance door. That's when he felt a draft by his foot. He bent down and put his hand next to the floor. The draft was coming from behind the wall.

He rose and pushed on it. It didn't move. He looked along the base for another screw, found one, and pushed on it.

Click!

This time, the door bumped inward. Whit pulled it open to reveal a large tunnel extending into the darkness. "So that's how he and the cat got out," he muttered. He pointed his light down the length of the shaft, but he couldn't see beyond a few yards. Whit took a few steps inside and heard a crinkle beneath his foot.

He shone the light down; he was stepping on some folded papers. He picked them up, tucked the flashlight under one arm, and unfolded them. One appeared to be the blueprints of Blackgaard's Castle before it was Blackgaard's Castle. But when Whit examined the second one, his eyes widened, a chill went up his spine, and he nearly dropped the flashlight.

It was very old, encased in laminate, and bore the title "Odyssey Passageways" printed across the top in ornate lettering. It was a map of a network of interwoven tunnels connecting various spots around town. Two of those spots were Gower's Landing, which had become Blackgaard's Castle, and the Fillmore Recreation Center, which became his own place, Whit's End. But that wasn't the cause of his reaction.

He had seen this map before.

At Whit's End.

He had found it stuffed between two wall studs when he tore out the plaster and lath while renovating the space that became the Bible Room. He had sent it to one of his oldest friends, who collected and studied antiques.

Jack Allen.

Whit tucked the map and blueprints in his jacket and bolted back through the lab space, into the corridor, up the stairs, and out of the remains of the arcade, headed for his car.

He hadn't talked to Jack in more than five years, before he bought the Fillmore Recreation Center. In fact, the last time they were together was in Nebraska at the orphanage Jack ran.

Whit frowned. The Clara incident.

It was after his wife, Jenny, had died. Whit went to stay with Jack and ended up bonding with a little orphan girl named Clara. She'd brought comfort and hope back into Whit's life, and he wanted to adopt her. Jack had withheld the truth that Clara was already adopted. When Whit found out, he was so upset he told Jack he didn't think he ever wanted to see him again. He immediately regretted it and had tried to talk with Jack over the ensuing years, but they never reconnected.

Whit had even sent Jack the map as a sort of peace offering, but Jack never acknowledged he'd received it. Whit knew he needed to get ahold of his friend somehow, to make sure he was all right.

Questions raced through his mind . . . *How did Blackgaard get the map from Jack? Was Councilman Philip Glossman actually representing Blackgaard when he fought Jenny for the Fillmore Recreation Center all those years ago?* Lucy had confirmed to Whit that Blackgaard was after Applesauce, the secret computer program Whit had created. *Does Blackgaard plan to use the tunnel to sneak into Whit's End and steal Applesauce? How does Blackgaard even know about Applesauce to begin with?*

Whit was almost to his car when a new thought struck him—one so frightening, it made him stop dead in his tracks.

What if Applesauce is just a feint, the tip of the iceberg? What if something much deeper—and far more terrible—is really going on?

CHAPTER TWO



AMSTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS: ONE WEEK LATER

“It’s a temporary setback, Chairman, nothing more.” Dr. Regis Blackgaard’s normally smooth baritone sharpened with intensity, echoing off the wood-paneled walls of the dimly lit, cavernous boardroom. His immaculately clad, angular frame sat upright at one end of an oak table, polished to a high gloss and so long he was certain a small aircraft could land on and take off from it. Pools of light illuminated the chairs on both sides of the table, reinforcing its landing strip image. Though otherwise calm in appearance, the manicured nails of his white-knuckled hands attempted in vain to claw through the table’s varnished edges and dig into the wood grain underneath.

“These things happen when one is endeavoring to change the world,” Blackgaard continued smoothly. His coal-black eyes gazed intensely to where the table stretched into the semidarkness at the opposite end of the room.

There the silhouette of the chairman, a hefty, balding man, sat squat in a large leather chair, a fat cigar smoldering in his stubby fingers. His facial features were completely obscured by shadow,

and when he spoke, Blackgaard couldn't help but think of a large toad sitting on a log in a swamp, waiting to nip fireflies out of the air with his tongue.

"I'm sure they do, Regis," his gravelly voice grated across the distance. "And I am sorry to be the bearer of bad news. But the decision is final. The Center of Scientific Understanding finance committee has voted to pull your funding."

"But they can't! I'm so close! So very, very close!"

"They can, and they have." The stubby-fingered hand lifted the cigar to the shadow-covered mouth, and when it took a pull, the glow of the cigar briefly illuminated a craggy, pockmarked face and a wide frown. The hand took away the cigar, obscuring the face once again, though a swirl of smoke now surrounded the chair. "Some here never believed in Professor M's project in the first place. It seemed more like fantasy than science."

"They are wrong!" Blackgaard insisted. "I am on the verge of proving it. I just need more time."

"You have all the time you need," the chairman countered with a hoarse chuckle.

"But not money," Blackgaard growled.

"Because there is no more."

"Not for me!"

"Not for anyone."

Blackgaard frowned. "Explain."

The chairman took another puff. "You've been in that small town so long, you haven't kept up with current events. The Soviet Union is collapsing, Regis."

"What are you talking about?"

"The Politburo made the mistake of trying to keep up with Reagan and the Americans. As a result, the Soviets have spent themselves into near oblivion. The USSR is all but bankrupt. It will not survive much longer."

Blackgaard's jaw clenched. "Fools!" he hissed. "Bureaucratic collectivist fools!"

Smoke curled around the chairman's head. "Be that as it may, those 'fools' have withdrawn their support. No support from them means no support for you."

Blackgaard's eyes narrowed. "But surely an organization like the Center of Scientific Understanding has more than one source of funding?"

"Of course." The chairman leaned back, and the leather seat groaned under him. "We will survive. But as for your project—" he brought the stogie up to his mouth again—"you're on your own."

Blackgaard's mind raced. His operation and facility in Chicago—pilfering, pickpocketing, and plundering high-ticket electronics—would keep things running. But for the bigger goal, he'd need a much larger source of funding—the kind of resources governments controlled and the very wealthy possessed. Hakim, his personal chemist, had offered to introduce him to the latter, friends of his in the Middle East with agendas of their own and oil money to back it up. Blackgaard had resisted such invitations up to now—too many unpleasant strings attached to them—but perhaps it was time to rethink that policy. In fact, that may be a way to bring in government resources as well. A plan was forming; he'd need time to think it through, but as the chairman said, time was one thing he had in abundance.

Blackgaard sighed heavily. "Very well. If you'll give me Professor M's research notes, I'll be on my way."

The chairman chortled. "And why would I do that?"

Blackgaard blinked. "I need them to continue my work."

"But why would we just give them to you?"

"Because you're not continuing the project!" answered Blackgaard, leaning forward. "You just said that some here don't even believe in it!"

"True, but there may be someone out there who *does* believe in it," the chairman said evenly. "Someone with money."

Blackgaard rose from his chair. "You're going to sell the professor's research?!"

"To the highest bidder."

"No!"

"Yes. The professor donated his papers to us. We can do with them as we like." Cigar smoke fairly enveloped the chairman now. "Of course, we would certainly entertain any bid from you—assuming you can find the funds to back it up, of course."

His stubby index finger jabbed the armrest of the chair, and the double doors of the conference room opened by themselves. "Best of luck, Regis. Do keep in touch." Another puff. "Or not. Your choice."

Blackgaard slammed his hands on the tabletop. The smack echoed around the room and caused the chairman to jump in his seat. Blackgaard leaned forward, eyes narrowed, his deep baritone deadly calm. "Oh, I'll be in touch, Mr. Chairman. Count on it." He stormed from the room, jaw clenched.

The COSU was the past; he would now look to the future. And that future . . . was still in Odyssey.

CHAPTER THREE



“Jason?”

“Uncle Wilson!”

“I thought that was you! Get over here and give your ol’ uncle a hug!” The two men embraced warmly, clapping one another on the back. When they released, Pastor Wilson Knox grabbed Jason Whittaker by his stocky shoulders. “What in the world are you doing in North Carolina?”

“I love coming back to Provenance,” Jason said with a smile. “The place where you and Dad grew up! Uncle Jack, too.” He suddenly looked puzzled. “Wait a minute—what are *you* doing here? I thought you were a traveling preacher.”

“Oh, I am, I am!” Wilson nodded, running a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. “I’m heading out again next week, in fact. But Provenance is what you might call my ‘headquarters’ when I’m not on the road. It’s a place where I can relax and regroup and refresh.” He looked fondly around the small, shop-lined main street. “It’s . . . home.”

Jason smiled, and his deep brown eyes gazed up and down Main Street. Provenance was a sleepy hamlet that time seemed to have passed by, located between Durham and Raleigh. He

remembered the make-believe adventures he and his siblings had when they were much younger and visited Grandpa Harold and Grandma Fiona in their house on Magnolia Lane. And he remembered hearing about the *real* adventures his father and uncles and their friends had around the town when they were kids. Gold, ghosts, moonshine, and bank robbers! He wondered if adventure followed the Whittakers, or if they created it wherever they went. Probably a little of both, he decided.

Wilson cuffed him on the shoulder, ending his reverie. “So how about you?” the older man asked. “Still working for that government agency? What is it you do there, anyway? Something exciting and clandestine, no doubt!”

Jason grinned. “It’s actually a lot of reading and analysis. Pretty boring stuff, really.”

Wilson’s eyes narrowed. “I see . . . you know, your Dad says the same thing on occasion—usually after he has disappeared for a while and no one knows where he went. I’m not sure I believe either one of you.”

Concern replaced Jason’s smile. “Well, actually, as much as I love Provenance, there *is* another reason I came.”

Wilson stuck his finger in the air. “Ah-ha! I knew it! Well then, what say we go into Hoops Diner for a slice of pie and a cuppa joe, and you can tell me why you’re *really* here?”

Hoops was another place where walking through the front door was like being transported back in time—to the 1930s, to be precise. A long wooden counter and stools, not unlike the ones at Whit’s End, lined one side of the room; a row of wooden booths and tables lined the other side. Once Wilson and Jason parked themselves in a booth and ordered slices of berry and apple pie and two coffees, Wilson fixed his nephew with a conspiratorial stare and said, “Well?”

Jason grinned. “Okay. First, why I’m really here has nothing to do with my job. I’m actually looking for Uncle Jack. I got a near-panicked phone call from Dad about him. When Dad found out I was

on the West Coast headed back to DC, he asked if I would look in on Jack at the orphanage he ran in Nebraska.”

The waitress arrived with their order and set their coffee and pie in front of them. Jason took a sip of coffee and continued. “But when I got there, they told me Jack resigned and left three years ago to move to Provenance. Only he didn’t leave a forwarding address or phone number. I still can’t find him. Is he here?”

Wilson swallowed a forkful of berry pie and shook his head. “Not anymore. He left about three weeks ago.”

“Left? Where’d he go?”

Wilson shrugged. “He didn’t say. He tried to turn the old Granville Mansion into an antique and historical artifact shop. But as it turned out, very few people around here were interested in antiques or historical artifacts—certainly not enough to keep a business up and running. And then when the shop was broken into some months ago, he decided enough was enough, closed it down, and moved on.”

Jason picked up his fork and poked at his pie. “Someone broke into the shop?”

Wilson nodded. “Even Provenance suffers from crime.”

“Uncle Jack wasn’t hurt, was he?”

“No, no, it happened at night when no one was there.”

“What was stolen?”

“That is what was strange,” Wilson answered, chewing another bite. “Jack said only one thing was taken—a map.”

Jason had speared an apple slice and was in the process of bringing it to his mouth when he stopped and slowly lowered the fork. “Map? What kind of map?”

Wilson took a gulp of coffee and replied, “Believe it or not, it was some kind of map of that town where your dad lives—Oddity?”

“Odyssey!”

“That’s it.”

Jason leaned in. "That's the map Dad gave Jack right after the Clara incident! It was supposed to be some sort of peace offering!"

Wilson shook his head slowly and muttered, "Well, I'll be . . ."
Then his brow furrowed. "But why would someone want to take *that*?"

"Yes," Jason muttered thoughtfully, "why, indeed . . ."

Uncle and nephew sat quietly for several minutes, nibbling at their pie and sipping the remainder of their coffee. Finally, Wilson took a deep breath and said, "Well, I don't think either one of us has enough information to solve this puzzle. Are you staying the night? I'd love to have you up to my place."

Jason smiled and shook his head. "I appreciate the offer, but I need to get back to DC. I have a trip I've got to get ready for."

"Where are you headed, if I may ask?"

"The Middle East. You?"

"Burma," Wilson replied, "well, Myanmar, now."

Jason gave a low whistle. "They just had a revolution there, y'know."

Wilson smirked. "I'm aware. I'm going with a humanitarian aid organization doing relief work at a prison."

Jason's eyebrows rose. "San Wing?"

Wilson nodded, surprised. "You know it?"

"Of it. Dangerous place—very rough. It's one of the worst prisons in the world."

"That's why we're going," Wilson said. "They need help the most."

"Be careful, Unc."

"No worries. You, too. The Middle East is no picnic, either."

"Don't I know it! Keep me in your prayers?"

"Of course. And me in yours."

"Always."



“So, Jack is all right, then?”

“As far as I can tell, Dad. He didn’t leave a forwarding address or number this time, either.”

Whit sighed into the phone receiver. “Yeah, that’s Jack—always trying to disappear into the woodwork. I pray God keeps him safe.”

“You really should reconcile with him, you know.”

“I know. And we will, if I can ever find him.”

“You wanna tell me what’s going on with this map?”

“I can’t, son. Not yet.”

“Yeah, I thought so. Listen, I’d like to keep looking for Uncle Jack, but I’m leaving in the morning.”

“I understand. Agency keeping you busy?”

Now Jason sighed. “You know how it is. There’s always something going on in the world we need to look into.”

“You sound tired.”

“Maybe a little.”

“You can walk away, you know. Even if it’s just for a little while. Come home to Odyssey to rejuvenate. No place like a small town to do that.”

Jason chuckled. “That’s just what Uncle Wilson said about Provenance.”

“He’s right.”

There was a pause, and then Jason almost whispered, “I have thought about it, actually. The timing is not right now, but . . . maybe I will—one day.”

“Soon?”

“Maybe.”

“I love you, son. God bless you and keep you.”

“Thanks, Dad. Love you too.”

The phone line clicked dead, and Whit slowly replaced the receiver in its cradle. He said a quick prayer for Jason, Wilson, and Jack, and then his thoughts turned to the map. No doubt one of Blackgaard’s henchmen stole it from Jack. But how did Blackgaard

know Jack had the map in the first place? And aside from a means of escape, what would Blackgaard need in the tunnel under Whit's End? Blackgaard wasn't the careless type, so it was highly unlikely he dropped the map by accident. *Is he taunting me?* Whit wondered. The frightening thought returned, but he suppressed it. No sense in jumping to conclusions. He would have to be patient and trust in God.

Whit sighed heavily. This was like an epic chess match, only one where his opponent could see all of his moves, but he couldn't see any of his opponent's moves. "So the obvious question," he muttered, "is which piece moves next?"

CHAPTER FOUR



WASHINGTON, DC: EIGHT MONTHS LATER

"I'm sorry, Professor, but the new compound didn't work." Tasha Forbes pushed a lock of her auburn hair behind her ear, cradled the phone receiver between her shoulder and pretty, heart-shaped face, and consulted her notes. "The computer simulator showed that the covalent bond simply wouldn't stabilize."

"I was certain zis was zee one!" Hans Tessler's French accent intoned from the receiver. "It seemed so right! Are you certain you can trust zis computer simulator?"

"Oh, yes. It is part of a very powerful computer program."

"Are you certain you can trust zee *programmer*?"

"John Avery Whittaker? Absolutely. I worked with him as he developed the technology. Trust me—the simulator works."

"*Oui*, of course."

Tasha sighed and leaned her petite but solid frame back in her chair. "We may have to face the unpleasant fact that the right compound simply doesn't exist."

"*Non!* Don't say zat, *ma chère!* As Edison learned with his light bulb filament, we have to keep looking!"

"Yes, but where?"

“Zere is one more place,” Tessler replied. “In zee papers of a colleague of mine from zee Center of Scientific Understanding.”

“Who is this person?”

“You wouldn’t know him. A brilliant man, but he had troubles after ze war. Had to go into hiding, but he donated all of his papers to zee COSU before he left. I remember going through zem. He was very excited about some discovery he had made. I can’t recall what it was. Unfortunately, much of what he wrote about it was *charabia*—gibberish, almost *fantaisie*. But I do remember him mentioning a catalyst—a neutralizing agent he discovered in a soil sample.”

“Soil from where?”

“Again, I can’t recall. I will have to look at his papers to know for certain.”

Tasha took hold of the receiver. “Well, let me know what you find.”

“But of course!”

There was a long pause, so long Tasha thought they had been disconnected. “Professor? Are you there?”

“*Oui, ma chère*. I was just thinking . . . I hope your government appreciates all we are doing for it.”

Uh-oh, thought Tasha, instantly sitting upright. *Trouble*. “I can assure you it does,” she said aloud. “Why would you think otherwise?”

“No reason . . . it’s just zat . . . zis information we are working on is very important. If we are successful, it could change zee balance of power in *le monde*—zee world.” Tessler took a deep breath. “I would hate to see it fall into zee wrong hands.”

“And by ‘the wrong hands,’ I assume you mean any hands other than those of my government?”

“*Oui*.”

“Is there any danger of that happening?”

“*Le monde est dangereux*—zee world is a dangerous place, *mon amie*.”

"Has someone approached you?"

"*Non, non,*" Tessler said dismissively. "Nothing like zat." Then his tone changed to utter seriousness. "I just want to impress upon your government zat zese secrets must be kept safe . . . *at any cost.*"

And there it is, Tasha thought. *Money.* She took a deep breath. "I agree, Professor, and that is precisely what my government will do. We would be very displeased were this information to wind up, as you put it, in the wrong hands, and we would find out precisely how that happened—*at any cost.*"

Another pause, and then Tessler's dismissive tone reappeared. "*Oui, oui,* but of course. Don't mind me, *ma chère.* Ignore zee ramblings of an old man. I didn't mean to alarm you. I shouldn't have said anything. When are you coming to see me?"

"I'm making plans to do so right now."

"*Merveilleux!* Wonderful! I look forward to seeing you zoon! Meanwhile, I will look through zose papers and let you know what I find! Zis will be . . . what number?"

Tasha consulted her notes again. "Um . . . number 415."

"TA-415. *Très bien,* eh?"

"Yes, Professor. Very good."



"Do ye think he's been compromised?"

Tasha suppressed a grin at her boss's Scottish accent and then took a deep breath. "I don't know, Donovan. He could have been sincerely concerned about security—for himself and the project. Still, all of that talk about appreciating the work, and how important it is, and protecting it at any cost . . . I just don't know."

Her boss, aka 'Headman', retrieved a thistle pipe from a holder on his desk, brought it to his mouth, struck a match, and lit it. The delicious aroma of pipe tobacco filled the air almost instantly. He blew a thin stream of gray smoke from his lips, leaned back in his

chair, and stroked the white, neatly trimmed beard that framed his ruddy face. "Oh, I think ye do. And I also think ye know what the next step is."

Tasha nodded. "I need to go to Geneva. I already told Tessler I was coming."

"And *staying*."

Tasha blinked. "For how long?"

"For as long as it takes, lass. This project is too important to be handled long-distance anymore." He leaned forward and pointed at a stack of files on a credenza opposite his desk. "Take a look at those."

Tasha retrieved the files and rifled through them as Donovan continued. "We've gotten a good deal of intel on activities in the Middle East."

Tasha glanced up and grinned. "Jason's doing his usual thorough job."

Donovan nodded. "I'd expect no less. As ye can see, a great number of fresh terrorist cells are forming."

"That's nothing new. Cells are always popping up in that region. They fade away just as quickly."

"True enough. But there is one in there that is behaving a bit differently. File 34."

Tasha shuffled through the stack, put number 34 on top, and flipped it open. "Red Scorpion?"

Donovan took a pull on his pipe and puffed out a small cloud of smoke. "Silly name, I know, but the leader is doing things a bit differently than the others."

Tasha scanned the file. "Mustafa . . . no last name. Interesting. Indicates he thinks he's special . . . from Raqistan . . . large family . . . educated in—" She stopped and looked up at Donovan again. "Geneva."

Donovan nodded. "And he makes frequent trips there. He comes from a wealthy clan—oil money. He's smart, and he has a small, but devoted, group of followers that he has handpicked from other

radical cells. Any dissent from them is dealt with ruthlessly. We don't know what he's up to or if he is connected to any other group."

"Yet," Tasha said knowingly. She smirked. "I can certainly see why you need me in Geneva." She rose and replaced the files on the credenza. "I'd better go pack."

She headed for the door, but Donovan stopped her. "One thing more, Tasha."

She knew what was coming. "Yes?"

Donovan set his pipe back on the holder and stood. "I had another visit from General Howell this morning."

"Oh?" she said, feigning innocence. "How is he?"

"Angry. He wants Applesauce."

"Well, he should go to the cafeteria; I'm sure they have some—"

"*Dinna* play games with me, young lady!" Donovan snapped. "It's been eight months since ye took the program off Whittaker's computer. The general wants what his department paid for—and is *entitled* to."

Tasha took a deep breath. "I can't give it to him, sir."

"Why not?"

"It is a very complex program, tightly interwoven. Separating what the general is entitled to has proven to be a very delicate operation."

"Then bring in someone who can *unweave* it."

Tasha shook her head. "With all due respect, sir, that wouldn't be wise. Applesauce is incredibly powerful. Few people should know about it, and even fewer have access to it." *Especially a bungler like General Howell*, she thought.

Donovan growled. "If the general doesn't get what he is entitled to, then he will be well within his rights to demand the whole program!"

"That would be an even bigger security risk, Donovan! We can't have multiple copies floating around out there!"

"If that is true, then ye won't be taking Applesauce with ye to Geneva."

Tasha's jaw dropped. "But I need it!"

Donovan brushed away her comment as though he were batting away an annoying fly. "Ye canna have it both ways, lass. If it's a security risk for the general to have, then it is a security risk for you to take as well." His steel-gray eyes looked at her with unshakable resolve. "Make your choice."

Tasha scowled and looked at her feet. She loved working for Donovan, but sometimes he could be a real pill.

"Well?"

Tasha took a deep breath. "All right . . . I'll give him the program."

Donovan nodded curtly. "Good." He returned to his chair and his pipe. "See to it ye have it ready for him before ye leave."

"Yes, sir." She started for the door and then stopped. "May I ask a favor, Headman?"

"What is it?"

"Tell Jason I said 'hi.'"

Donovan's hard look softened, as did his voice, and he nodded again. "Will do, lass." She opened the door, and this time he stopped her. "Tasha."

"Sir?"

"Be careful."

She smiled. "As Jason is fond of saying, 'Always.'"

CHAPTER FIVE



One of the great ironies of life, Whit often pondered, is how things we consider to be advantages can also turn into drawbacks. For instance, the great advantage of living in a small town like Odyssey was that you got away from the rat race of a big city. The pace was slower, people were friendlier, and it was easy to forget that there were bad things going on in the world and bad people making those things happen. And therein lay the drawback.

Though Whit did not completely forget what had happened at Blackgaard's Castle, during the course of the following year, he allowed the ups and downs and joys and sorrows of everyday life in Odyssey to push the warning signals to the back of his thoughts . . .

. . . until an incident occurred that uncovered the next chess move. Then the signals started blaring again. To paraphrase his friend and custodial services provider Bernard Walton, it was like "goin' to a four-alarm fire, sirens blazin'!"

The move involved fruit—apples, to be precise.

Tom Riley's apples, to be even more precise.

It began when kids started getting sick at Whit's End. It was nothing serious, just stomachaches and nausea, but Doctor Garrison suspected it might be something chemical, like an insecticide or bug

spray. Connie insisted, and Whit confirmed, that no insecticides were kept anywhere near the food, neither in the kitchen nor at the counter. After a bit of deduction, Whit and Connie determined that the three sick kids all had eaten something that contained apples. Apples from the Riley farm.

Back at the farm, Tom's horse, Rachel, was also ill. And then young Curt Stevens appeared in the barn, informing Tom that the fish in his creek were not well—in fact, they looked dead. The same creek Tom used to irrigate his orchard, and the same creek Rachel drank from when she got out of the stable a few days ago.

Tom immediately recalled all of his apples and contacted the local environmental agency. But he also determined that wasn't good enough. "This is *my* responsibility," he'd insisted. "It's my land and my apples, and I don't want to hand it off to somebody else. I'm gonna find out who's messing up my creek—and I'm gonna find out now!"

And so, about an hour and a hot, sweaty trek through the woods later, Tom and Curt found a barrel, lying on its side, open and empty, rusting in the creek bed. With a bit of effort, they managed to turn it over to reveal a name painted on its other side.

The name was "Edgebiter."

Back at his workshop at Whit's End, Whit had just finished running tests on water samples he had collected from Tom's farm when Tom called to tell him about the barrel and the company name. Tom added that he and Curt were in the lobby of the Edgebiter Chemical corporate office at this very moment, waiting to file a complaint with a customer service representative.

When Whit heard the company name, he stayed outwardly calm, but his heart beat a little faster and his mind began to race. After Tom hung up, Whit went back to his office, secured the door, and pulled from his desk drawer a slip of paper on which he had scribbled ". . . ebit . ." He sank into his chair and quickly filled in the blank spaces around those letters:

“E-d-g-e-b-i-t-e-r.”

A piece in the chess match had definitely just moved.

Edgebiter Chemical had supplied Blackgaard with equipment, materials, and possibly even chemicals for his secret lab in the basement of Blackgaard’s Castle—a lab that opened to a tunnel that led directly under Whit’s End.

The frightening thought he had at Blackgaard’s Castle and after talking with Jason struck him again, and this time he could not suppress it. *Is it possible that Blackgaard . . . actually . . . knows?* Whit shook his head and muttered, “But how could he? It’s *not* possible.” It was a deeply held secret that no one knew but him and Jack, and Jack would never tell . . . would he? “No!” he said aloud, more forcefully. Despite their falling out, Jack would not do such a thing.

Still, there was no denying Blackgaard’s longstanding interest in Whit’s End—and now there was a clear indication that he was also interested in what was *under* the old building as well. Whit leaned back in his chair and stroked his chin.

Finding out what chemicals—if any—Edgebiter had supplied Blackgaard would go a long way toward confirming what Blackgaard knew. But it was unlikely that Edgebiter would just hand over that information to Whit, especially after he and Tom filed a formal complaint against the company with the government’s environmental agency about its chemical spill on Tom’s farm. If he were to go after Blackgaard’s purchases from Edgebiter, he’d have to do it in court, but doing so would mean actually revealing to the public his deeply held secret—the very information he was currently only suspicious Blackgaard knew.

No. Going to court would be playing into Blackgaard’s hands. He wouldn’t do that, and he was certain Jack hadn’t done it, either. *But if Blackgaard does have the information, and he didn’t get it from Jack, then how did he get it?*

Whit looked at the bookshelf, behind which was hidden his computer room. Richard Maxwell had assured him that Blackgaard also hadn't gotten Applesauce. Despite all the bad things Maxwell had done, Whit believed him. Then a new thought occurred.

Just because *Blackgaard* hadn't gotten the program didn't mean *someone else* couldn't have downloaded it.

After the Blackgaard's Castle debacle, Lucy confessed to Whit that she had heard him give the password verbally to Mabel, the computer's interface. He didn't suspect Lucy, of course, but anyone else who might have been listening in at that moment would have definitely heard it as well. And he had a good idea of who that might be.

The agency.

Whit scanned his office for their listening device; it could be hidden anywhere. Aside from Blackgaard, they were the only ones with the needed resources, abilities, and interest in the Applesauce program to surreptitiously download it from Mabel. Just as with Edgebiter, though, he had no proof of their involvement, and they would simply deny it if he asked them. He needed more information—rock-solid evidence. He sighed. Of course, even if he were able to get it, he wasn't sure exactly what he could do about any of this.

He pondered that for a long moment and then dismissed the thought. "I'll cross that bridge when—and if—I come to it," he muttered aloud. Meanwhile, there *was* one thing he *could* do. He leaned forward in his chair, unlocked and opened another desk drawer, and pulled out the tunnel map. He placed it on his desk and studied it carefully. He was fairly certain that the tunnels themselves were historically valuable—especially the one under Whit's End, so he couldn't collapse it completely. But he could definitely block access to the tunnel from Blackgaard's Castle.

He found the point on the map he was looking for, started to rise from his chair, but then stopped. He sat back down, folded his hands together, bowed his head, and prayed softly.

“Lord God, You know all things. Guide me. Help me make the best decisions. Give me strength to face what lies ahead and do what needs to be done. Protect us all, I pray. In Your Son’s holy name, amen.”

No sooner had he unfolded his hands and looked up than a word popped clearly into his mind:

Missions.

His brow furrowed. *Strange*, he thought. After a moment, he shrugged his shoulders and pushed back his chair. Again, the word popped into his mind, more forcefully:

Missions!

He swallowed hard, shook his head to clear his thoughts, took a cleansing breath, and started to get up.

And the word came once more, this time from an audible voice, so strong and rich and pure it slammed him back down into his chair:

“MISSIONS!!”

Wide-eyed, breathing hard, pulse racing, he was aware that the room took on a sepia hue and appeared tilted, though his chair and everything on his desk stayed in place. Almost without realizing it, he reached for the phone and dialed a number. When the receiver on the other end clicked to life, he heard himself talk as calmly as if he were having tea and conversation with Tom on the porch downstairs on a lazy summer afternoon.

“Bill? John Whittaker . . . Fine, thanks. Listen, I’ve been thinking about Universal Press getting involved in missions work, long-term missions . . . I know, but I think it’s something we *should* be doing. It’s important . . . South America and the Middle East, for starters . . . Yes, I know we’re beginning from scratch.

“I need you to set up some meetings where we can lay the foundations on this . . . I realize it will take some time; that’s why I want to get started now . . . Who will be going? Well . . . me . . . I know, I never thought I’d leave Odyssey long-term, either, but this is

something I think I need to do. Now I'm not ready to go just yet, but I do want things in place when the time is right . . . Good, Bill. Let me know when the first meeting is set. Thanks."

He placed the receiver in its cradle and instantly relaxed, his breaths coming more evenly now. He looked around the room. Everything was normal. He adjusted his glasses, inhaled and exhaled sharply, puffing out his cheeks, and then glanced upward. "Missions, eh?" he said lightly, his voice cracking. He nodded slowly. "Okay, Lord. Thy will be done."

He picked up the tunnel map, rose cautiously from his chair, and walked a bit unsteadily out of his office, closing the door behind him.

CHAPTER SIX



CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

"There you are."

Richard Maxwell scrunched down in a booth in the back of a small diner across from the Excelsior Hotel in Chicago. He was as discreet as he could be for someone looking through a small pair of binoculars. The diner was nearly empty, so he didn't need the anonymity of the dark baseball cap, sunglasses, and black jacket with the turned-up collar he was wearing. But when he caught his reflection in the diner window, he decided he liked the look and the image, so he kept his attire in place. And now his discretion and patience had been rewarded; the object of his semi-clandestine surveillance had finally appeared: one Gregory Kelly.

He would have recognized Kelly anywhere—same short, stocky build; same long, greasy blond hair combed back and chopped off at the neck; same pimply complexion. "Hello, you slime ball," Maxwell hissed quietly.

Through his binoculars, he watched Kelly pace back and forth between the hotel's main entrance and the entrance to its parking garage. Kelly carried a large black sports bag emblazoned with the

symbol of some tennis shoe company. “Sloppy, Greg,” Maxwell muttered. “Someone could recognize the bag. And could you *look* more nervous? Good grief!”

Kelly finally stopped at the parking garage. He waited for a couple of cars to go inside and then looked back at the main entrance. *Making sure it’s clear*, Maxwell thought. Kelly then slunk into the garage entrance and disappeared from sight.

Maxwell relaxed back into the booth seat and sipped his soda, still keeping an eye out the window. He had been released early from the Campbell County Detention Center three days ago, after serving two years of his sentence. The warden’s parting words still rang in his ears: “You’ve been given a great gift, Maxwell. Take advantage of it. Do good. Learn. Grow. Make something of yourself.”

For a moment, he’d thought he was listening to Whittaker and wondered if the old man had actually told the warden what to say. But he nodded solemnly to the warden and said, “Yes, sir. Thank you. I will.” And he meant it; he had every intention of taking advantage of his situation—just not in the way the warden meant.

He had gotten out early for good behavior, and no one was more surprised about that than he was, for a couple of reasons. First, he’d never in his life gotten anything for being good. And second, he was surprised because of who ended up in the detention center with him: one Myron Horowitz. Myron liked to be known as “Jellyfish,” and he was Maxwell’s old fence for merchandise that he pinched from the folks at the Odyssey Retirement Home. Thanks to Myron and his crew, Maxwell had thought he might end up with months, or even years, added to his sentence.

Myron had managed to get himself nabbed by the authorities for some silly thing and wound up arriving at CCDC shortly after Maxwell. At first, he was so scared he stuck to Maxwell like glue. But before long, Myron started making friends—and not the good kind. Maxwell didn’t want anything to do with them, and he tried to keep to himself, which was a mistake in detention. On the inside, you

needed allies; there was nothing worse than being a loner—which meant that Maxwell not only got picked on and roughed up on a regular basis, but he also got blamed whenever anything bad happened, usually caused by Myron and his friends.

Fortunately, Jellyfish had a short stay in detention; as soon as he was gone, his little gang dispersed, and things improved dramatically for Maxwell. Even so, he vowed not to forget what Myron “Jellyfish” Horowitz had done to him and to repay the favor one day. But first things first. Though Myron had made his life in detention quite difficult, Maxwell had learned a bit of useful information from him: Greg Kelly was working for Blackgaard in Chicago.

Maxwell first met Greg when they both had jobs in the Chicago sewer system. Greg showed him the ins and outs of the system, and Maxwell realized that it could help him with his other unlawful activities around the city. One of his cardinal rules was to always have a good escape route nearby, and in most cases, there was none better than a sewer system—it was easily accessible, and it went everywhere.

He was surprised to learn that Kelly worked for Blackgaard and had worked for him back in the old days before Maxwell had even met the nefarious doctor. Maxwell wondered if Kelly were responsible for bringing him to Blackgaard’s attention. If so, he’d need to “thank” Greg one day in the same way he planned to “thank” Myron.

But right now, he needed Kelly to lead him to the bigger prize: Blackgaard himself. Since Kelly was working for him, it was a safe assumption that Blackgaard either was in Chicago or would be, eventually. But even so, Maxwell had no idea where Blackgaard’s warehouse was located. Sure, he’d been there once before, but that was a while ago, and he had gotten there in the back of a windowless van. But Kelly *must* know where the warehouse was, Maxwell reasoned. He had to take the goods he was pilfering *somewhere*.

As if on cue, Kelly emerged from the garage, sports bag slung over one shoulder, looking significantly heavier than it did when he went into the garage. He headed up the street. Maxwell tossed a few dollars on the table, bolted from the booth, and ran from the diner, hoping against hope that Kelly didn't have a car.

He didn't. Instead, Kelly went to the nearest L train stop. Maxwell followed, keeping a discreet distance. He was amazed at Kelly's brazenness—he was moving stolen goods in broad daylight on public transportation. On the other hand, why not? So long as he kept to himself, no one would notice him or question what he had in the bag.

The train pulled into the station, and both Kelly and Maxwell hopped aboard. After about a twenty-minute ride—during which Maxwell pretended to be asleep behind his sunglasses but was actually watching Kelly's every move—Kelly got off at the Fulton River District stop. Maxwell waited until Kelly had disembarked and headed for the stairs before he jumped up and skidded out of the train car himself, barely making it through the doors before they slid shut. He scanned the crowd for his mark, saw Kelly just about to descend the stairs, and raced after him, dodging workers, commuters, and tourists as deftly as he could.

As he tailed Kelly down the street, Maxwell took in his surroundings. They were definitely in the city's warehouse district, on the northwest side near the Chicago River. It was a mix of old and new buildings, and it looked as if some of the older warehouses were being converted into condos. Kelly walked several blocks and finally turned down an alley between two older buildings.

Maxwell sidled up to the alley entrance and peered around the corner. Kelly strode up to a door on the northernmost building, knocked in a strange pattern, stepped back, and held out his arms. After a few seconds, the door opened, a large man peered out, and

Maxwell's heart nearly skipped a beat. He recognized the man as one of the goons who had muscled him into the windowless van that brought him here the first time.

This was it. Blackgaard's warehouse.

Kelly went inside and the thug shut the door. Maxwell slid back around the corner, his heart pounding in his chest. He took a deep breath. *Now what?*

He decided he would do the only thing he could do: scope out the building for all its entrances and exits, find a nice, high, cozy spot from which to surveil the place, take note of everyone who comes and goes there, and then wait for an opportunity to present itself.

"And when it does," he muttered, "sweet revenge, Blackgaard." He smiled. "Sweet revenge."

CHAPTER Seven



LONDON, ENGLAND

“Are you certain you want to do this, my friend?”

Dr. Blackgaard smiled and took a sip of hot tea, his thin finger snaked through the delicate handle of the dainty cup. “Quite certain, Hakim,” he replied once he had swallowed the steaming liquid and replaced the cup in its saucer. “But you seem unsure now.”

Hakim returned the smile and nibbled on a biscuit, which is what the British call a cookie. “Not at all. It’s just that, once you make this decision, there is no going back.” Another nibble. “Red Scorpion does not tolerate dissent.”

“Since I have no intention of dissenting, there is nothing to worry about, is there?” Blackgaard gulped the remaining tea in his cup and then set it and the saucer on the small table in front of them.

Hakim took another nibble of his biscuit and studied Blackgaard intently for a few moments. He then placed the remainder of the biscuit back on its plate. “Very well. I will make the necessary calls and tell Mustafa of your interest. Do not expect an immediate response, however.”

Blackgaard nodded. "Understood. Though I would . . . *emphasize* . . . to him the importance and urgency of the situation. Respectfully, of course."

"Of course."

The two men rose from their chairs and embraced. When they broke, Blackgaard grasped Hakim's hand. "I'm looking forward to doing great things together, my friend. Very great things, indeed." Hakim smiled politely once more. Blackgaard dropped his hand, and with a slight bow, Hakim turned and left the café.

Blackgaard watched him go, tapped on his ascot, and then retrieved his walking stick. He laid some coins on the table, adjusted his frock coat, and strolled outside, taking in the cloudy morning sky for a few moments. He then strolled up the street to the end of the block. There he turned and continued his trek for another half a block, until he came to an alley. He paused and, when he was certain no one was watching, moved quickly into the passageway and stepped lightly toward a large white delivery truck parked there.

He knocked thrice on the back door of the truck, and a few seconds later, the door slid open. He climbed inside, and the door slid shut in one smooth motion.

The interior walls of the truck were lined with electronic equipment and manned by two technicians wearing blue jumpsuits and headphones. There was also a third man inside the truck, sandy-haired, wearing a suit and tie, sporting aviator-style glasses, and seated in a swivel chair, which he turned to face Blackgaard. He, too, wore headphones, which he removed as he turned. The two men stared at each other for a moment. Finally, Blackgaard said, "Well? Did you hear it all?"

The sandy-haired man nodded. "Yes, indeed," he replied with a cultured British accent. "The wire worked perfectly. Pristine sound." He pointed at Blackgaard's chest. "You can take it off now, by the way."

Blackgaard leaned his walking stick on the side of the truck, unbuttoned and removed his frock coat and waistcoat, loosened his ascot, and unbuttoned his shirt. A small, thin wired microphone was taped to his chest beneath the ascot. He slowly peeled back the tape, taking a few unwilling chest hairs with it, and began unthreading the microphone from his clothing. "So? Are you satisfied?"

Sandy-hair sniffed. "For the moment. You've certainly proven you have contacts. However, it remains to be seen whether they will contact you back."

"Oh, rest assured, they will. What I'm offering is too valuable for them not to." Blackgaard carefully coiled the wired microphone. "They will contact me; I will infiltrate them; and when I have gained their trust, I will hand them over to you in European Security." To punctuate his point, he held out the wired microphone. Sandy-hair took it and handed it to one of the technicians, a big, blond, beefy character. He placed it in a drawer in his console.

Sandy-hair then leaned back in his chair. "And what's in it for you, Doctor?"

Blackgaard shrugged as he rebuttoned his shirt and waistcoat. "Just the satisfaction of knowing I have made the world a safer, better place."

"I see."

Blackgaard adjusted his ascot, donned his frock coat, and rebuttoned it. "So, what do you say? Am I in?"

Sandy-hair swiveled away from him again. "Provisionally. There is a task we'd like you to perform first in order to—how do you Americans say it?—'seal the deal'?"

"Task? What kind of task?"

"Oh, it's something right up your alley. You see, we know all about your pilfering and black-marketing electronic devices."

"And?"

"And there is one we would like you to pilfer for us."

Blackgaard's eyebrows rose. "Oh? What kind of device?"

"A laptop computer." Sandy-hair began writing something on a pad of paper sitting on a small table in front of him. "Our contact in America will fill you in on all of the details." He tore the top sheet from the pad on which he had been writing, swiveled back around, and handed it to Blackgaard. "Here is his information. Memorize it and destroy the paper."

Blackgaard smirked. "How dramatic."

"Do not take this lightly, Dr. Blackgaard!" Sandy-hair snapped. "Espionage is not a game, despite what you may have read in novels or seen in movies."

Blackgaard nodded solemnly. "No, no, of course not. Forgive me." He scanned the paper. "Mm . . . Department of Defense—interesting." He studied it for a few moments more and then took a lighter from his pocket and lit the paper on fire. It fluttered to the floor and burned itself out. "Done. I shall leave for Washington tonight."

"No, the two of you shall leave for Chicago tonight. That is where you shall make contact."

Blackgaard blinked. "I'm sorry—'the two of us'?"

Sandy-hair smiled. "You and Pinky." He gestured toward the beefy technician, who removed his headphones and rose from his chair, towering over Blackgaard. Muscles bulged through his jumpsuit.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," he said with a thick, gravelly Austrian accent.

Blackgaard's eyes widened. He was amazed the man could fit inside the truck.

"Pinky will assist you with the mission," Sandy-hair continued. "He's very resourceful and will provide you with whatever help you may need."

And report back to you on my progress, no doubt, Blackgaard thought.

"The fewer people who know about this operation, the better," Sandy-hair continued, "so there really is no need to keep any other muscle around, if you get my drift."

Blackgaard smiled. "I do indeed." He looked up at the large chiseled face in front of him. "And your name is really . . . 'Pinky'?"

The mountainous man nodded. "Ya. Is dere a problem?"

Blackgaard held up his hands. "None at all." He attempted to peer around Pinky at Sandy-hair. "I do have a question, though."

"Yes?"

"Since you have Pinky here, why can't he simply complete the mission on his own?"

Sandy-hair peered around Pinky at Blackgaard. "Two reasons: One, because he isn't an American; and two, if he does it, how will we know if *you* can handle and complete a mission?"

Blackgaard chuckled. "Points taken. Very well then; come along, Pinky!" They moved to the door, slid it open, and stepped outside.

"Best of luck, Blackgaard!" Sandy-hair chimed.

Blackgaard bowed slightly. "Why, thank you . . . Filby."

He slid the door shut with a bang.

CHAPTER EIGHT



TWO WEEKS LATER

Airports are amazing places. They are at once filled with joy and sorrow, excitement and boredom, satisfaction and frustration, anxiety and peace. They are mini-cities, bustling with commerce and activity, where almost every aspect and action of daily human existence occurs, including travel. It was in such a mini-city center of travel—O'Hare International Airport, to be precise—that Whit and Connie found themselves that weekend.

It was a trip for sightseeing and relaxation, and for Whit to meet with his people at Universal Press about his future missions plans, about which Connie knew nothing. It pained him that he couldn't tell her the real reason for this trip or all his other trips to Chicago, or what he was actually doing at Universal Press.

One day, he hoped he could tell her and Eugene and everyone else in his life all about it. But he was cheered by her wide-eyed wonder at the size of O'Hare and hoped to make the trip as exciting for her as he could, which started happening almost as soon as they stepped off the plane. An airport security guard appeared seemingly out of nowhere, blocking their path. "Excuse me, sir."

Whit stopped and took a step back. "Yes, Officer?"

"Step over to this table, please." The guard gestured to his right.

Connie frowned and touched his arm. "Whit?"

He patted her hand, and they both walked to the table. Whit faced the guard and asked politely, "What's going on?"

"Random security check," the guard replied. "May I ask you what's in that bag you're carrying?"

"It's my laptop computer."

"Uh-huh," the guard grunted. "Would you place the bag on the table and open it up, please?"

Connie squeezed her boss's arm. "Whit, what's—?"

Whit held up his hand. "Just relax, Connie. Of course, Officer." He placed the bag on the table, unzipped and opened it, and displayed it to the guard.

The guard examined the computer in the bag but did not touch it.

"Would you turn it on so I can see something on the screen, please?"

"Sure." Whit slid the computer and bag back in front of him, opened the laptop's lid, and pushed the power button. The computer whirred and beeped, and after a few seconds, the main screen materialized.

Connie scowled at the guard. "What are you checking for—bombs? Drugs? Bootleg tapes of 'The Praise Kids in Concert'?"

Whit shot her a reproving glance. "Connie."

The guard studied the computer's main screen. "This is your laptop? No one asked you to carry it for them?"

"That's correct," Whit replied. "I've had it by my side since leaving my house in Odyssey this morning."

After another few seconds, the guard nodded. "All right, you can close it up now." Whit powered down the computer and secured it in its case. The guard retrieved a small, official-looking pad of paper from his shirt pocket. "I'm going to give you a pass so you won't be stopped again." He tore off the top sheet of the pad and handed it to Whit. "There you go. Sorry for the inconvenience."

Whit smiled. "That's quite all right."

Connie held up her handbag. "Don't you want to look in my purse, too?"

"No, ma'am. What we're looking for is too big to fit in your purse."

"What *are* you looking for, Officer?" Whit asked.

"As I said, sir, it's just a random security check."

"On *incoming* passengers?" Whit questioned. "I don't think so. What's really going on here?"

The guard grimaced. "I probably shouldn't . . ." He took a deep breath and continued. "Ah, you'll hear it on the news anyway. We're searching for a stolen computer—one that looks exactly like yours."

Connie snorted. "All this hassle for a computer? What was it made of—gold?"

The guard held up his hands. "I really can't say anything more. If you'll excuse me . . ." He beat a hasty retreat.

Whit and Connie watched him go, and then Connie turned to Whit. "Do things like this always happen to you when you come on these trips?"

Whit grinned and shook his head. "Nope, this is the first time."

Connie threw her hands in the air melodramatically. "Oh, great! Make me feel welcome, why don'tcha?" She moved on, and Whit chuckled and followed. But when he glanced back at the security guard, his smile faded, and an ominous feeling crept up his spine.

Something was going on, and it wasn't something good.

CHAPTER NINE



After they collected their bags (Connie's was so packed, Whit nearly busted a gut lifting it), they headed outside to find the van to their hotel. "It's the world-famous Excelsior Hotel," Whit said. "Service is their first priority—or whatever the ads say. They have a shuttle every fifteen minutes. Come on."

Outside, they met with a cacophony of car exhaust, honking horns, slammed car doors and trunks, hundreds of people talking and milling about—and more police and security than Whit had ever seen there. "This is really something."

"What?" asked Connie.

"All the police. Whatever was on that stolen computer must've been pretty important." His gaze rested on a large, brightly colored van with the word "Excelsior" spelled out in classic calligraphy.

"There's our shuttle, Connie! Let's hurry!" He quickened his pace, and Connie trotted after him.

Whit called, "Hold that van!" But his words were drowned out in the bustle of the loading zone. Whit slowed down as the van started to pull away from the curb. "Aw—we're going to miss it!"

Suddenly, the shrillest whistle blast he'd ever heard sliced through the street noise, followed by his employee Connie screaming in her piercing tone, "Hey! Wait for us!"

The van screeched to a halt.

Whit smiled at her and shook his finger in his ear. "I *knew* I brought you along for a good reason!"

The van driver exited the vehicle and raced around it and up to them. "Sorry 'bout that, folks! Didn't see ya! Now, you both just hop in the van and make yourselves comfortable, and I'll put all your stuff in the back." He grabbed their bags and pointed to Whit's computer bag. "You wanna keep that with ya?"

Whit shook his head. "Not if there's room back there. Just be careful with it."

"'Careful' is my middle name!"

Whit handed over the computer bag, and he and Connie clambered into the van and took their seats.

After a few moments, the van shook as the driver closed the back doors, and then jolted again as he opened the driver's side door, hopped in, and shut it again. He started the van, put it in gear, and pulled away from the curb deftly. "All three of ya going straight to the Excelsior?"

Connie frowned. "All *three*? There are only two of—" She looked behind her as she spoke and saw the third passenger—a short, stocky young man with long, greasy blond hair combed back and chopped off at the neck, and a pimply complexion, scrunched down in the farthest seat back. Connie blinked. "Oh, sorry! I didn't see you hiding back there!"

The young man glared at her. "Hiding? Who's hiding?"

Connie chuckled uneasily. "I'm kidding. Did you just come in to Chicago?"

He stayed scrunched down, peering out the van's window, his eyes darting about. "Uh, yeah, something like that."

"Guess you missed your flight after all, huh, kid?" the driver chimed in. "You goin' back to the Excelsior?"

"Yeah. Fine. Anywhere."

Connie smiled. "This is my first time."

The young man shot her an irritated glance. "I'm thrilled for ya." He looked back out the window. "Look, do ya mind? I'm not big on small talk."

Connie's smile faded. "Well, excuse me!" She turned back around, sank into her seat, and muttered, "Just tryin' to be friendly. Nice town . . ."

Whit leaned forward. "Driver, do you know anything about why all the police are at the airport?"

The driver gazed back at Whit through his rearview mirror. "Just heard about it on the news. Turns out a courier for the Department of Defense had his car broken into last night. Whoever did it swiped some money, papers, and one of those laptop computer thingamajigs. Guess it has a bunch of top secrets on it."

Whit stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Department of Defense, huh?"

The driver nodded. "Yeah. Courier stopped to go to the can, and whaddya know—he gets his car broke into. Anyway, the police are at the airports and stations trying to snag whoever in case they try to get outta town. Sounds like a lost cause to me. Probably some kid looking to steal the car stereo. I'll bet he's scared out of his—"

The young man suddenly blurted out, "Does the conversation come with the cost of the shuttle or what?"

The driver blinked and peered at him through the rearview. "The man asked me a question."

The young man sat up. "Pull over, will ya?"

"What?"

"I changed my mind. I don't wanna go back to the hotel. Just pull over and get my stuff outta the back!" He started scooting toward the passenger door.

The driver waved his hand. "All right, all right!" He maneuvered the van back toward the curb. Irritated drivers around them responded with honking horns and shouted curses. The van driver slowed to a stop, opened his door, hopped out of his seat, and made his way to the rear of the van.

Meanwhile, the young man stretched for the side passenger door handle but couldn't quite reach it. Whit, who sat nearest to it, grabbed the handle and slid the door open for him. "Uh, I'm sorry if we were talking too much."

The young man sidled to the door. "Nuthin' personal. I just want out, that's all. 'Scuse me . . ." He clambered out of the van, grabbed the door, and slammed it shut so hard, both Whit and Connie flinched.

"Whoa!" Connie exclaimed. "What's *his* problem?"

Whit watched the young man disappear around the back of the van and shook his head. "No telling. He seemed awfully nervous."

"Yeah . . . y'know, I think he really was hiding back there."

"Mm . . ." Whit looked thoughtful for a moment and then shrugged. "Well, you meet all types at the airport."

The driver closed the back doors, rushed to his place at the front, climbed in, put the van in gear, and skillfully merged back into airport traffic. "Sorry 'bout that, folks. Strange kid."

Whit leaned forward again. "Did you bring him from the hotel?"

"Sort of. He met me out front. But when we got here, he didn't get out. Kinda slumped in the seat and watched as we drove 'round. Pretty suspicious, if ya ask me."

"Didn't he have a flight to catch?"

"I don't think he knew what he was doing. Like I said: strange kid. Only had the two shoulder bags too. I was half-tempted to get a cop, but hey, I got a schedule to keep. Guess we'll never know, huh?"

"I guess not." Whit settled back into his seat, brow furrowed, a frown on his face.

They rode the rest of the way to the hotel in silence, the driver concentrating on traffic, Connie gazing out the window and drinking in the Chicago skyline, and Whit lost in thought.

Once they checked into the hotel and settled into their rooms, Whit called his Universal Press associate to check in and go over the agenda for the next couple of days. He had just hung up the phone when there was a sudden banging on his door, followed by Connie's muffled voice from the hallway. "Whit! Whit!"

He traversed the room and pulled open the door. "What's wrong, Connie?"

She rushed in, wild-eyed, face flushed. "Turn on your TV—quick!"

Whit crossed to the coffee table, grabbed the television remote, and clicked the "on" button. "All right, all right, but why? What's so —?" The TV flickered to life.

Connie pointed at it. "The news! Look! Maybe they'll show another picture! Turn up the sound!"

Whit pressed the volume button, and the TV news anchor's voice faded in. ". . . police say their informant has indicated that the break-in of the unmarked Department of Defense car was intended as a petty theft and that the suspect had no idea of what he was stealing."

A picture appeared on the screen. Connie pointed again. "There he is! See the picture?"

Whit's eyes narrowed. "I see, I see!"

The news anchor continued. "The suspect, Greg Kelly, has been convicted of petty theft in two prior cases. Authorities are asking him, or anyone who has seen him, to call one of the numbers on the screen immediately. Because of the top-secret nature of the missing laptop computer, authorities fear Kelly's life may be in danger . . ." Whit muted the volume.

Connie grabbed his arm. "That was him, right? I'm not seeing things?"

Whit shook his head. “Yes, it was—and no, you’re not. The young man in the van with us was Greg Kelly!”

CHAPTER TEN



“Don’t just sit there; say something!”

Kelly’s left leg bobbed up and down so fast, the folding chair he sat in started scooting backward across the linoleum office floor. He clamped his sweaty, shaking hand on his knee to stop the bouncing and the scooting and glared across a metal desk at his interrogator. After a moment, a cat meowed.

Dr. Blackgaard massaged the head of the large, fluffy gray Persian feline purring in his lap. “Cats are amazing creatures, aren’t they, Gregory? So sleek and gentle, and yet when they’re angry . . .” He suddenly and sharply yanked one of the cat’s ears, and she hissed and spat. “Aw, I’m so sorry, Sasha!” he said soothingly. He immediately began stroking and petting her again, and she lapsed back into gentle purring.

Kelly swallowed hard and wiped a trickle of sweat from his forehead. “L-look, you know me. I’m no spy. The car had a nice-looking radio. That’s what you pay me to do, right? Snatch radios and junk? Well, the other thing also looked good, so I grabbed it, too. I didn’t know it was some kinda top-secret military gizmo until I turned it on.”

"It's a laptop computer, Gregory, not a gizmo. Why didn't you come to me right away?"

"It was a normal heist! I was gonna meet you tonight as usual."

"You went to the airport."

"I got scared! I didn't know what to do!"

"You went to the *airport*, Gregory. You were going to leave, weren't you?"

Now both of Kelly's legs started bobbing, and he clasped his sides. "I-I . . . I was scared!"

Blackgaard set Sasha on the desk and leaned forward. "Of me? But why? I've always taken good care of you, haven't I?"

Kelly started rocking back and forth. "Yeah, but . . . this was something different. I mean, it's *hot*! I've got friends in Cincinnati. I thought I could lie low for a while."

"And you weren't trying to sneak out of town to sell the computer to someone else?"

Kelly stopped rocking and flung his hands on the desk. "No! No! I don't know people like that! Man, right now, I wish I never touched the thing! The police are swarming all over the place!"

Blackgaard rose, strolled over to a water cooler, filled a paper cup, and took a drink. "Did anyone see you at the airport?"

"I never got out of the hotel van."

"Which hotel?"

"I dunno . . . Excalibur or Excelsior—one of those 'ex's'."

Another sip of water. "So, the driver saw you."

"Yeah, I guess. Him and two other people—an old man and a girl. But I got out before the van got to the hotel, and I came straight here." Kelly clasped his sides and started rocking again. "I'm tellin' you, man, I'm *scared*!"

Blackgaard gulped down the last of his water, refilled the cup, and set it before Sasha on the desk. She lapped at it daintily. "No need to be, Gregory. I'll take care of you. Just like always. Your little

‘find’ could serve me very, very well. And you know how I reward those who serve me well.” There was a knock at the door. “Come in.”

The door opened, and Pinky squeezed his way through the entrance and into the office, carrying the laptop. He plopped it on the desk with a dull *thunk*, which startled Sasha. She bolted off the desk and into a corner, upending the cup and spilling the small amount of water still in it on Kelly’s worn sneakers. He barely noticed.

Blackgaard smiled pleasantly. “Ah, Pinky. Is it the right machine?”

The behemoth shook his head. “No. It’s just a regular laptop.”

Kelly stopped rocking and looked back and forth at them. “But it’s the one I got out of the car! I swear!”

Blackgaard’s pleasant demeanor didn’t change. “Are you *sure* it’s the wrong one, Pinky?”

“Yes. Da owner’s name is engraved on da bottom. I’ve checked through all da files on da hard disk. Boring. Academic material. No military secrets.”

There was a deadly pause. Blackgaard slowly shifted his coal-black eyes back to Kelly. “Gregory?”

Kelly stared at the computer, mouth agape. “I—I don’t know what happened! That’s it, I tell ya! That’s the one I got! And this morning it had all kinds of military technical junk on it! You gotta believe me!”

Blackgaard picked up the paper cup from the desk. “You wouldn’t be foolish enough to try to double-cross me . . .” He crushed the cup dramatically. “Would you?”

Kelly reeled back into his chair, nearly tipping it over. “No! No! Never! Really! Please!” He held up his hands in surrender, breathing hard. Tears trickled down his cheeks.

Blackgaard placed a soothing hand on Kelly’s shoulder. “All right, all right. Calm down. I believe you.”

Kelly slowly lowered his hands, though he was still wide-eyed, and his breathing remained labored. Blackgaard patted his shoulder reassuringly. “Pinky, I think Gregory needs some fresh air and food.

Are you hungry, Gregory?"

Kelly nodded hesitantly. "Y-yeah . . . kinda."

Blackgaard looked at Pinky. "Arrange for something to eat."

Pinky frowned. "Eat?"

Blackgaard raised his eyebrows and nodded at Kelly. "Yes, take care of Gregory . . . all right?"

Pinky's brow furrowed for a long moment, and then suddenly his eyebrows rose as well. He nodded at Blackgaard. "Oh! Sure! Come on, Gregory."

Kelly arose warily from his chair and then grabbed Blackgaard's arm. "Wait a minute—you can help me get outta Chicago, right? I can't afford to get caught. Not again!"

Blackgaard looked at Kelly's hand, and the young man slowly removed it from his arm. Blackgaard then looked at him and smiled warmly. "Trust me." He banked the crushed paper cup off the wall and into the trash can. "The police will never find you."

Kelly looked uncertain for a moment and then exhaled, relieved. "Thanks. You won't regret this. I mean it."

"I know, I know."

Pinky held the door and gestured for Kelly to walk through it. Once he did, Pinky gave Blackgaard a knowing glance and nod and then shut the door.

Blackgaard retrieved Sasha from the corner, returned to his desk chair, and sank into it. "Bunglers! I'm surrounded by bunglers!" Sasha meowed, and Blackgaard stroked her head absently. This whole assignment had been one large boondoggle from the get-go. His American contact had told him what an idiot General Howell was—how he had gone to a conference on the West Coast, had taken with him a laptop loaded with government secrets, and had actually *left* it at the conference!

Howell didn't want anyone to know what he had done, so he hired a private courier to drive it back to him in Washington, DC. But as further proof of the general's imbecility, he left the courier's

itinerary sitting on his desk where anyone—including the American contact—could read it! It would be like taking candy from a baby!

The cat meowed again, and Blackgaard sighed heavily. “Oh, Sasha, it was all going to be so easy, wasn’t it? Disguise Pinky as the courier, have him ‘commandeer’ the computer and bring it directly back here . . . only, Pinky makes a pit stop and Kelly steals the computer from him! And then Kelly grabs the wrong one out of a hotel van!” He scoffed. “Sounds like a Marx Brothers movie, *if* I believe Kelly actually made an honest mistake.”

He pondered the possibility for a moment and then shook his head. “He doesn’t have the brains for anything else. But the chances of there being two identical computers in the back of the same hotel van are . . .” He sighed again, put Sasha on the desk, and then picked up the laptop. “Still . . . let’s see whose name is on the bottom of this one.” He flipped it over. “A little chat with him might—”

He stopped, stunned, hardly believing his eyes. The name plate on the bottom of the computer read,

“Property of John A. Whittaker, Whit’s End, Odyssey.”

A smile slowly curled Blackgaard’s lips, which turned into a chuckle, which morphed into a full-throated, robust laugh! “Oh, Sasha!” he croaked. “It truly is a small world!” He burst out laughing again, and it grew in intensity . . . deeper, darker . . . filling the office, the warehouse, and the alleyway outside.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Whit and Connie sat in front of an old wooden desk in a small office at the local police precinct. Whit cleaned his glasses patiently with a handkerchief, while Connie glanced up at the clock on the wall for the umpteenth time and huffed. “How much longer do you think we’ll have to wait?”

“I don’t know. I’m sure the police are doing their best.” Whit pocketed the handkerchief and redonned his glasses.

“Do you think we’ll still have time to see the Sears Tower before it closes?”

Whit smiled. “We’ll try.”

The door opened, and in walked a lanky man with blond hair cropped in a crew cut, wearing a cheap suit and a serious expression and holding a file. He crossed to them and shook their hands. “I’m terribly sorry for the delay, Mr. Whittaker, Miss Kendall. I’m Special Agent Frank Phillips with an investigative unit in the Department of Defense. We’re working with the Chicago police on this case—or more accurately, they’re working with us.” He moved behind the desk and sat in a swivel chair.

Whit’s eyes narrowed. “So, they’ve pulled in the Special Branch for this.”

Phillips opened the file and scanned it. "This is very serious, Mr. Whittaker. That computer has to be found. Now, I've been reading over the statements and description of Greg Kelly you gave Detective Baker a few minutes ago."

"A few hours, you mean," Connie growled, crossing her arms.

Phillips shot her a glance. "Yes, well, as I said, I'm sorry for the wait. Normally you would've been out of here by now, but your position, Mr. Whittaker, required an additional security check."

"You had to double-check Whit? Why?"

Phillips looked at her boss. "Mr. Whittaker knows the answer to that, I think."

Whit turned to her. "Remember Applesauce, Connie?"

Connie's brow furrowed. "The computer program? How could I forget it? It made Whit's End go crazy! I—" She stopped and her eyes widened. "You made that for the Department of Defense?!"

Whit shrugged. "Among others."

Now Phillips's brow furrowed. "She knows about Applesauce?"

"Nothing that would breach security," Whit replied.

Connie touched Whit's arm. "But . . . you destroyed Applesauce!"

Whit smiled. "It's not the only program I've worked on, Connie."

"Once an agent, always an agent—eh, Whittaker?" Phillips smirked.

Connie's jaw dropped. "An *agent*?"

"That was a very long time ago," Whit said quickly and then turned to Phillips. "Can we get on with this, please? I don't think you've kept us here because you want to review my past."

Phillips nodded, serious again. "You're right. You're still here because now that I know who you *really* are, I'd like to establish your connection with all this."

"There is no connection beyond what I've already told you."

Phillips leaned back in his chair. "Come now," he said skeptically. "A government computer gets stolen, and I'm supposed to believe that you—a man who spends a lot of time working on government computer projects—just *happened* to be in the same van as the suspected thief?"

Connie stiffened. "It may sound odd, but that's what happened."

"Uh-huh . . . who are you working for, Mr. Whittaker?"

"I'm not working for anyone, Mr. Phillips, and I don't believe you have security clearance to ask me these questions."

Phillips bolted forward. "I'm cleared to ask whatever I need to ask to find this computer before it falls into the wrong hands—if it hasn't already."

Whit's piercing blue eyes met Phillips's and stared right through him. "And I assure you that the account of what we've done and who we've seen since arriving in Chicago is the truth. That's as much as I can do to help you find that computer."

Phillips slowly backed away but kept his eyes on Whit's. "All right. But I *will* be in touch again."

"I look forward to it," Whit said with deadly calm. "Can we go now?"

Phillips smiled grimly. "Of course. I don't want to hold up your visit to the Sears Tower. Have a nice day."



The unmarked police cruiser ferrying Whit and Connie back to the Excelsior pulled up in front of the hotel and stopped. Connie exited from the backseat and Whit from the front passenger side. He turned back and looked at the officer. "Thanks for the lift!"

The officer nodded. "No problem!" He touched the brim of his hat. Whit smiled, closed the door, and stepped back from the curb as the car pulled away and blended into traffic.

Connie moved closer to him. "I'm gonna tell you right up front that I don't like that Agent Phillips. He's too nosy."

Whit turned to her, and they headed toward the hotel's main entrance. "He's just doing his job."

"Maybe, but there was a point there where it almost sounded like he thought *you* stole that computer!"

Whit shrugged. "I'm sure he considers that a distinct possibility."

"What? But why?"

"When you're dealing with the kind of information that's on that computer, Connie, you have to suspect *everyone*—especially all who may have had access to that information."

Connie growled. "Well, I guess that's true, but now . . . well, now that he . . . that he . . ."

Whit grinned. "Knows who I am?"

"Yeah!"

"Believe me, Connie, that's not as big of a deal as you think it is."

Connie sniffed. "Yeah, well, it's not every day you find out your boss is a special agent!"

"Was," Whit corrected, "and it was a long time ago—and I don't wanna talk about it."

"But—"

The Excelsior's doorman interrupted her. "May I get the door for you, ma'am?"

Connie looked at him, surprised. "Oh—uh, thank you!" The doorman obliged, and Whit and Connie entered the lobby.

Whit nodded at the doorman as he passed. "Thanks."

Connie immediately turned to Whit to continue their conversation, but Whit held up a hand. "I mean it, Connie." He headed across the ornate lobby toward the elevator.

She sighed with frustration and followed. "Okay, okay. We won't talk about it. But do you think Phillips trusts you now?"

"No. I'm sure he doesn't."

"Why not?"

"Didn't you wonder how he knew we wanted to see the Sears Tower today?"

Connie shrugged. "I figured we said something about it."

"We did—*before* he came in."

Connie stopped in her tracks. "You mean—"

Whit also stopped, and nodded. "The office was bugged. They were listening in on our conversation while we were waiting. That's how they work."

Fear flashed across Connie's face. "Oh, brother. This is starting to give me the creeps."

Whit put a hand on her shoulder. "Don't let it spook you. As far as I'm concerned, we've done our duty and should get on with our sightseeing—"

"Pardon me."

Whit and Connie both whipped around. A thin and thinly mustachioed, official-looking hotel employee with dark, slicked-down hair had appeared next to them, almost silently. "You're John Whittaker and Connie Kendall, correct?"

"That's right," Whit replied.

"I'm Victor Herman, the manager of this hotel. Would you be so kind as to come to my office? It's rather an emergency."

Connie's eyes widened. "Emergency?"

"Yes. Please follow me."

CHAPTER TWELVE



A few moments later, they all walked through the door of the hotel manager's office. It was a large room, tastefully decorated, with a highly polished executive oak desk and plush desk chair at one end, and an equally polished small oak conference table with comfy padded chairs at the other. An oak bookcase lined one of the walls, but its shelves contained surprisingly few books and instead were loaded with framed pictures, knickknacks, and pretentious bibelots.

Mr. Herman mopped his brow with a silk handkerchief. "In the twenty-five years that I've been working for the Excelsior, we've only had this sort of thing happen three times."

"What sort of thing?" Whit asked.

Mr. Herman closed the door and lowered his voice. "An attempted break-in."

"Break-in!" Connie shouted.

Mr. Herman held up his hands. "Not your room, Miss Kendall—Mr. Whittaker's."

"An 'attempted' break-in?" asked Whit.

Mr. Herman nodded. "Yes. It happened about an hour ago. Thelma, one of our cleaning staff, came upon the culprits just as they tried to break into your room."

"Culprits—there were more than one?"

"Two sharply dressed, very professional-looking men. They ran when Thelma shouted. We didn't catch them, unfortunately. I put your things in the hotel safe, just in case."

Whit took a breath. "I see. Mind if I have a look?"

"No, of course not!" Mr. Herman headed for the bookcase. "It's right over here—"

Suddenly Connie headed for the office door. "I'm going up to check my stuff."

Mr. Herman stopped and backtracked. "Uh, I'm positive they didn't touch your room, Miss Kendall. Our hotel security officers have already been in."

At the door, Connie looked at Whit. "I still wanna check it."

Whit nodded. "I think you should. But, Mr. Herman, would you please have one of your people let her in the room?"

"Certainly!" Mr. Herman moved to his desk, picked up the phone receiver, and punched a button. "Yes, this is Mr. Herman . . ."

As he spoke, Connie moved back to Whit and whispered, "I don't need anybody to let me in."

Whit matched her volume. "I know, but I don't want you walking into the room by yourself."

Connie sighed. "This is unbelievable!"

Whit smiled. "Life in the big city, kiddo."

"Then I'm glad I live in Odyssey!"

Mr. Herman cradled the receiver. "The bellboy on that floor will meet you at the elevator, Miss Kendall."

"Thanks."

She started off, and Whit said, "I'll be up in a few minutes, Connie."

She nodded, opened the door, and stepped through to the lobby. "They better not've touched my hair dryer." She closed the door. Whit stifled a chuckle.

Mr. Herman gestured toward a nearby chair. "If you'll have a seat while I open the safe?"

"Of course." Whit sat.

Mr. Herman moved to the bookcase, reached under a shelf near the bottom, and pushed down a hidden lever. There was a *click*, and he pushed the shelf aside, revealing a walk-in-sized combination safe. His fingers fumbled nervously with the dial. "I just want you to know how very sorry we are for the whole incident, Mr. Whittaker. As I said, this has rarely happened. We would be honored if you would have dinner here tonight at our expense."

"Thank you, but that won't be necessary." Whit stroked his chin. "I just can't imagine what I would have that anybody would want to steal."

Mr. Herman dialed in the last number. "Ah, here we are." He pulled down a lever on the safe door. There was a *clack*, and he pulled it open. "I believe you'll find everything in order—your suitcase and your computer."

The realization hit Whit like a ton of bricks. "Computer?" He rose from the chair and moved to the safe.

"Yes," Mr. Herman replied. "I have a laptop of my own, although my carry bag is not as nice as this one."

Whit stared at the computer bag, barely listening. "Is it possible . . . ?" he murmured.

"Something wrong?"

"Perhaps." Whit retrieved the bag. "I need to look at my computer. May I use your desk?"

"Of course."

"Thank you." Whit unzipped the carry bag, pulled out the computer, and examined it. "Mm-hm, my identification plate is gone."

Mr. Herman mopped his brow again. "This *is* the computer we brought down from your room, Mr. Whittaker, I assure you!"

"I have no doubt of that, Mr. Herman. Could you leave me alone for just a moment, please?"

"Alone? Uh . . ." Mr. Herman looked around the room. Clearly his nerves weren't used to this sort of thing. "Well, yes, of course, anything you like." He bumbled his way to the door and exited the room.

Once Herman was gone, Whit lifted the lid of the computer and pushed the power button. "There's only one way to be sure . . ." The machine whirred and beeped to life. A few more keystrokes, and he had his answer. A United States Department of Defense emblem appeared on the screen. "I don't believe it!"

Words faded in, in front of the emblem. Whit read them aloud. "This computer and its contents are the property of the United States Department of Defense.' This is the stolen computer!" He stroked his chin again. "Now, the question is: Did those men *put* it in my room, or . . ." It hit him. "Was it accidentally switched in the hotel van?"

He took a calming breath. "Okay, slow down. No jumping to conclusions. The only way to be sure this is the one is to check the programs . . . suppose my old passcode still works?" He typed in "Whittaker_Alpha_Omega_J316," and to his delight, the computer's home screen dissolved into one containing dozens of small icons. He smiled. "Nice to know I'm still in the loop and have access."

He took another breath. "Okay, time to close this down and call the authorities." He started to type the exit command when something on the screen caught his eye—something he thought impossible. "No, it can't be!"

He slowly moved the cursor to the icon and double-clicked on it. When the program opened, his heart both skipped a beat and sank at the same time. "No, no, *no!* I don't believe it! I don't *believe* it! What did you all *do?*"



Connie paced nervously around the elevator car as it carried her upward, muttering to herself. "This is unbelievable . . . first we get stopped at the airport, then we spend all morning at the police station, and now somebody tries to break into our rooms!" She sighed. "What next?"

The elevator bell dinged, the car glided to a stop, and the doors slid open to reveal a huge man standing in front of her, wearing a too-small bellhop uniform. "Are you Miss Kendall?" he said with a strange accent.

"Yeah, but you're not the bellboy—hey!" Before she even knew what was happening, the hulking man swiftly grabbed her arm with one hand and clamped his other mitt over her mouth. "Let me g—mmfffflgh!"

He pulled her out of the elevator and, despite her struggling, easily carried her down the hallway and into a service exit.

The elevator doors slid shut silently.



"Hotel operator," the filtered voice intoned through the speakerphone.

"Yes," said Whit, "get me the police."

"Right away, sir."

The door opened, and Mr. Herman crept back into his office and sidled up to Whit. "Mr. Whittaker? Is everything all right?"

Whit shook his head. "No." He turned off the computer, placed it back in the carry bag, zipped it up securely, and handed it to Mr. Herman. "Will you please put this back into the safe and keep it there for me?"

Mr. Herman took the bag. "Of course." He moved back to the safe.

"And I'm the only one who has access to it, right?" Whit asked.

"Absolutely, except for myself, of course."

“Under any circumstances?”

Mr. Herman placed the computer back in the safe, rose to his full height, and turned to face Whit. “Sir, we treat our hotel safe like a Swiss bank.” He turned back around, closed the safe’s door, and pulled its handle. It clacked again; he spun the combination dial, slid the bookcase back into place, and secured it with the hidden lever. He then turned back to Whit and sniffed. “A Swiss bank.”

Whit smiled. “Good enough.”

A voice blurted out from the speakerphone, “Chicago Police Department.”

“Yes, Special Agent Frank Phillips, please.”

Mr. Herman wilted again. “Special Agent”? You’re not calling the police, Mr. Whittaker?”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Herman. We won’t cause a scene.”

Mr. Herman looked aghast. “A *scene*!?” He collapsed into a chair.

“Agent Phillips,” the speakerphone piped.

Whit picked up the receiver, and the speakerphone clicked off. “John Whittaker here. You were right and you were wrong.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I wasn’t involved in this case before, but I am now.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I have the computer you’re looking for. It must’ve been accidentally switched by the driver when Greg Kelly got out of the van.”

Phillips’s voice was suddenly more serious. “Where are you?”

“The hotel manager’s office.”

“Where’s the computer?”

“The hotel safe.”

“All right, don’t move, Whittaker. Stay right where you are. And don’t take your eyes off that safe. I’ll be right there. And for heaven’s sake, don’t talk to anyone. Don’t even open the door! You could be in great danger!” He hung up and the receiver went dead.

Whit replaced it in its cradle, sighed deeply, and started to sit when an alarm in his head jerked him back up again. "Danger?! *Connie!*"



Connie and the hulking man descended rapidly in a dingy chrome service elevator that wasn't anywhere near as nice as the previous lift. The hulk no longer carried her or had his hand clamped over her mouth, but he still had a viselike grip on her arm, so much so that her hand was starting to go numb. She looked up at his stoic, chiseled face. "I take it you don't work for the hotel."

He grunted.

"You didn't have to drag me to a different elevator, you know. The one I came up in also goes down."

The hulk sneered. "Too many people."

"Uh-huh . . ." She watched the lights on the panel pop on and off as they passed each floor. "Just out of curiosity, where does this elevator take us to?"

"Parking garage."

"Oh."

He looked down at her. "Relax. Everything will be all right. No one wants to hurt you."

She looked back up at him as the elevator dinged and the doors slid open. "Yeah? Well, you better watch it, bub, because I know John Avery Whittaker!"

A voice outside the elevator, recognizable somehow, responded, "What a coincidence . . . so do I."

Connie looked out the door, but no one was there. "Who said that?"

"I did." A familiar figure stepped into view and smiled. "Hello, Miss Kendall."

Connie gasped. "*You!*"

“Yes. Dr. Regis Blackgaard, at your service.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Whit paced around his room at the Excelsior like a caged tiger waiting for his dinner. Agent Phillips's young, bespectacled, curly-haired assistant, Woody, sat on the sofa, tinkering with a phone tap device he attached to the receiver on the room phone. After a moment, there was a gentle knock, the door opened, and Phillips strode in. "There's no sign of a struggle, no evidence that Connie was kidnapped."

Whit kept pacing. Phillips adopted an assuring tone. "You know how teenagers are, Whittaker. She probably decided to do some sightseeing on her own."

Whit glowered at him. "I know Connie, Agent Phillips. She wouldn't do something like that without telling me first. Especially with everything that's happened."

Phillips nodded. "Yes, well, we've checked for fingerprints. Everything's clean, as you'd expect. Y'know, if you told me the truth in the first place—"

Whit turned on him. "I *did* tell you the truth. I didn't know I had the government computer until I came back. It looks exactly like mine. The van driver must've gotten them confused."

Phillips folded his arms. "Uh-huh. Another coincidence?"

"I don't believe in coincidences, Agent Phillips, but yes, for lack of a better word."

"So, you have no idea who tried to break into your room?"

"Well, obviously, it was someone who wanted the computer," Whit snapped. "Beyond that, no. No idea."

The phone rang, and Whit pounced at it. Phillips grabbed his arm. "Wait! Don't pick it up yet. Woody, start the tape and begin the tap."

"The tape and the tap," Woody responded nasally. "Right." He held a thumbs-up, and Phillips let go of Whit's arm. "Okay, Whittaker. You're on."

Whit picked up the receiver and held it to his mouth and ear. "Hello?"

Connie's annoyed voice answered. "Hi, Whit."

He breathed a huge sigh of relief. "Connie! Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. But the person I'm with wants the computer."

"Who are you with, Connie?"

"He doesn't want me to be a name-dropper. He knows you're trying to tap the line, so I've gotta talk fast. He wants you to bring the computer and wait alone under the big clock in the center of North University's South Park Campus at six o'clock."

Whit glanced at his watch. "But, Connie—"

Click. The phone line went dead.



Blackgaard dropped the phone receiver into its cradle on his desk in the warehouse office and smiled benevolently at Connie. She scowled back at him. "There. I hope you're happy, Mr. Blackgaard."

"*Doctor* Blackgaard. And, yes, Connie, well done."

"You're gonna be in big trouble for kidnapping me, you know," she sneered.

Blackgaard chuckled in his deep baritone. "Kidnapping? I don't know what you mean. I invited you along for a look at my new electronics warehouse, and you agreed. You're welcome to go at any time you like."

"Really? Good." Connie jumped up and headed for the office door. "See ya."

"Of course, if you do go," Blackgaard chimed in, "it's anyone's guess what will happen to Whittaker."

Connie stopped. "Whaddya mean, *happen*?"

Blackgaard sat on the edge of the desk. "There are a lot of ruthless people who would do anything to get their hands on that computer."

"People you know personally, right?"

Blackgaard smiled and shrugged. "In a way, by staying with me, you're helping to keep him safe."

Connie glared at him for a few moments and then sighed heavily and plopped back down in the chair. "I figured there was a catch."

Another chuckle. "Funny, isn't it? Whittaker and I reunited once again over a computer? And all because of a meeting decreed by chance!"

Connie snorted. "Yeah. Hysterical."

"So, what do you think of my new operation?"

"Huh?"

Blackgaard opened his arms. "My warehouse! Every conceivable electronic device for every conceivable need. I'm opening a chain of stores."

"You're kidding."

"Not at all! It'll be called 'The Electric Castle.'"

Connie rolled her eyes. "Clever."

"I was even thinking of opening one in Odyssey. Perhaps on the site of my old shop."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"It's been two years. I miss the place."

She shook her head. "They'll never let you back in Odyssey."

"Why not?"

"Because of everything you did!"

Blackgaard rose from the desk. "And what, exactly, did I do?"

"*You* know. Richard Maxwell told the whole story at his trial."

Blackgaard's eyes sparkled. He began to pace slowly behind her chair. "Richard Maxwell? Currently serving time in the Campbell County Detention Center for arson?"

Connie crossed her arms. "You know who I mean."

"Mm. And the good people of Odyssey would take the word of a delinquent over mine?"

"Well . . ."

Blackgaard stopped and stood behind her. "He burned down Tom Riley's barn. He burned down my shop. I can't be held responsible for his actions. At least, not without any proof." He leaned in on her right side. "You . . . don't *have* any proof of anything, do you?"

Connie leaned away from him. "But why didn't you stick around to defend yourself? You disappeared."

Blackgaard shifted to her left side. "I had urgent business elsewhere and left the managing of my property to Mr. Glossman. Is that a crime?"

Connie again leaned away. "No. But . . . but . . ." she sputtered angrily. "Ooo! You have more loopholes than a spaghetti strainer!"

He stood up and laughed. "Ah, that Odyssean humor. Maybe I will pay a visit soon. After we get this bit of business taken care of."

She turned in her chair to face him. "The government isn't going to sit back and let you have their computer, you know."

Blackgaard put a hand to his chest, feigning dismay. "Miss Kendall, your lack of confidence deeply offends me." He leaned in close to her again. "What makes you think I'm not working *with* the government?" A Cheshire cat grin spread across his face, and he chuckled yet again.

Connie's eyes widened and her jaw dropped. "*What?*"

The chuckle turned into a sinister laugh and echoed throughout the building.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Back in the manager's office at the Excelsior, Mr. Herman had just finished opening the secret safe. Whit reached inside and pulled out the government computer, and then Mr. Herman closed the safe and locked it. Agent Phillips growled. "I don't like this, Whittaker, not one bit. You can't take the real computer! What if something happens to it?"

Whit set the carrying case on the desk, unzipped it, and checked its contents. "What if something happens to Connie if they discover I have a fake computer? We don't know who we're dealing with—or what they're capable of doing." He rezipped the case.

Phillips shook his head, moved closer, and reached for the bag. "I can't let you risk high security information."

Whit blocked him. "And I won't let you risk Connie's life." The two men stared at each other for a moment. Whit took a breath and continued, deadly serious. "Agent Phillips, if you've run a check on me like you say you have, then you know I'll do everything in my power to safeguard the secrets in that computer." He tilted his head slightly toward the case but kept his eyes locked on Phillips's.

There was a long pause, and finally Phillips backed off a few steps. He dropped his head and sighed. "All right. But if anything happens—"

"It'll be my responsibility," Whit interrupted. "Besides, there are certain safeguards we can take. I assume you still use homing devices?"

"Of course," Phillips barked irritably. "Woody, put one on the computer."

The young agent snapped to. "Yes, sir!" He moved to the desk, retrieved what appeared to be a coin from a bag of his own, fiddled with it for a moment, and then slipped it inside the computer case.

Phillips spread out a small map of the campus on the desk. "Take a look at this, Whittaker. We'll have our men stationed around the big clock . . . here at the library . . . here in the student union building . . . and here in the conservatory. I'll be in the science building, directly across from the clock. I'll be able to see everything from there."

Whit nodded. "Good."

"Not really. Unfortunately, today is the college's annual Summer Arts Festival. The place'll be packed. How's it coming, Woody?"

The young agent turned on a signal receiver he also retrieved from his bag, and it immediately began beeping. "The homing device is on."

Whit nodded at him. "Thanks. I'll need your handcuffs, Agent Phillips."

"Why?"

"Another safeguard. I'm cuffing the computer to my wrist. It won't go anywhere without me."

Phillips sighed again, pulled out his cuffs, and handed them to Whit. "Here. What about the key?"

Whit attached one cuff to the computer case handle and the other to his wrist. "Just so you know I'm on the up-and-up, you keep it."

Phillips grunted. "Anything else?"

"Yes, I'd like a moment alone."

"For what?"

"To pray."

"Pray?"

"That's right." Whit grasped the handle of the computer case with both hands. "It's the best safeguard I know."



Connie watched the second hand of the clock on the wall in Blackgaard's office tick past the number twelve. The minute hand moved to the eleven, and the hour hand inched closer to the six. Five fifty-five p.m. "Dr. Blackgaard . . ."

"Yes, Miss Kendall?"

"It's almost six o'clock. Shouldn't we be going?"

"Where to?"

"The big clock."

Blackgaard brushed lint from his frock coat casually. "And have government agents crawling all over us? You must be joking."

"But Whit is going to be there. Waiting. Just like you said."

"So I did. Well, perhaps plans have changed since you two spoke on the phone."

"Changed? But I thought—"

He wagged his finger at her. "No, no, Miss Kendall, don't try to think. Leave that to me." He smiled. "Dr. Blackgaard will take care of everything."



Whit stood in the middle of the plaza at North University's South Park Campus, clutching the computer case handcuffed to his wrist. Arts and crafts booths dotted the landscape, offering wares ranging from amateur to professional, and from the conventional to

the esoteric. A wandering brass band regaled the large crowd with classics and was currently engaged in a spirited rendition of "Listen to the Mocking Bird."

Agent Phillips and Woody watched it all from their perch atop the science building. "Everyone in place, Woody?"

"Yes, sir. They've all checked in and are hooked up to your remote mic."

"Good. Your binoculars."

Woody handed them over, and Phillips adjusted the focus until Whit was clearly in view. "Mm . . . Whittaker is under the clock. Okay, boys, let's pay close attention. There're too many people around. Whoever's behind this little trick knows what he's doing. It's easier to hide in a crowd. Check the homing device again."

Woody flicked a switch on a portable receiver and was rewarded with a steady beeping. "Working, sir."

"Wait." Phillips suddenly tensed and gripped the binoculars more tightly. "Some clown is approaching Whittaker."

"Who is it, sir?"

"Like I said, some clown. With balloons . . . Looks like he wants to sell Whittaker one. Whittaker's shaking his head *no* . . ." Phillips relaxed. "The clown's moving off. False alarm. Whittaker just nodded at me. I can't figure if he's an agent for one of the other divisions or not. I don't trust him, though. He's starting to pace, trying to look casual."

The large campus clock began to strike. *Gong!* It reverberated across the plaza. Woody checked his watch. "Six o'clock, sir. Whatever's gonna happen will happen now."

Phillips kept the binoculars laser focused on Whit. *Gong!* "Whittaker's stopped pacing and is standing still." He tensed again. "Wait. Something's happening. A crowd—a parade of some sort . . . It's moving past. I'm having a hard time seeing him." *Gong!* He refocused the glasses. "Woody?"

Woody peered through a second set of binoculars. "I see him. He's still there. Stations get ready." *Gong!*

Phillips adjusted his position, still looking through the binoculars. "I don't like this . . . Whittaker, I'm going to hold you personally— Wait! I've lost him!" *Gong!* "Hang on, there he is."

Woody spoke into his headset. "Be alert, boys. There are a lot —" *Gong!* At the very moment the clock struck six, and the beeping stopped, Woody flicked the switch on the receiver frantically. "Sir, the homing device just clicked off!"

Phillips's head jerked around. "*What?!*" He glared at Woody and the equipment for a second and then jumped up and went back to the binoculars. "That's not him!" he yelled into his headset. "Move in! Move in! Hurry! Blast it! Whittaker's disappeared!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Blackgaard slammed his hands on the metal desk in his warehouse office. "What do you mean Whittaker's disappeared?! Pinky, you bungled it!"

Connie's eyes widened. "Whit's gone?"

"Be still, Miss Kendall!"

Pinky held up a hand. "Id wadn't my fauld!" he said nasally. "He didappeared!"

"Take off that ridiculous clown nose!"

Pinky removed the nose, which honked when he squeezed it, and rubbed the sides of his nostrils. "I followed your orders to da letter. I vent up to him with da balloons and said to meet me behind da clock vhen it struck six. But he never showed! From da way da cops were running around, dey didn't know where he vent, either."

Blackgaard sank into his desk chair. "Curious." His gaze fell on Connie. "Well, Miss Kendall, it looks as if our Mr. Whittaker doesn't care for you as much as we thought."

Connie swallowed hard. "I—I don't believe it!"

"Perhaps he received a better offer for the contents of the computer."

She shook her head. "Not Whit. He doesn't think that way—like *you*."

Blackgaard smirked. "How naïve you are. Everyone thinks like I do, just not as intelligently."

"You're wrong."

"Yes," he growled, "for your sake, let's hope I am." He bolted up out of the chair, and Connie jumped. "Pinky, start packing. We have to get out of here. Time to come up with a new plan."

Pinky opened the door and scooted away, big shoes flap-flap-flapping. Blackgaard yelled after him, "*And take off that ridiculous clown costume!*"



"Oooo . . ."

Whit opened his eyes and immediately regretted it. A dull, throbbing pain was wedged in the back of his head and ran to just behind his eyes. He took a breath and, with an effort, sat up—and regretted that even more. He slowly touched the back of his head, where he felt a goose-egg-sized bump. "Oh . . . my head feels like someone shoved a bowling ball in my ear." He tried to look around, and a dull light pierced his brain. "Aaah . . . where am I?" A silhouette blocked the light. "Who . . . ?" His brow furrowed, and then his eyes widened as the silhouette came into focus. "No, it can't be!"

"Hiya, Mr. Whittaker!" The former silhouette smiled smarmily.

"*Richard Maxwell!*"

"The one and only."

Whit shook his head slightly and again regretted it. "I must be dreaming. You're in the detention center."

Maxwell shrugged. "Sorry to disappoint you. I've been let off for good behavior. Don't you just love our penal system?"

Whit winced. "Ow . . . What happened?"

"First, you fell." Maxwell pointed up. "That is, I dropped the sewer grating out from under your feet, and *then* you fell. Pretty smart thinking on my part, if I say so myself. Now you see him, now you don't."

Whit touched the goose egg gingerly. "What about my headache?"

Maxwell looked sheepish. "Well, after you fell, I sort of had to . . . conk you to make sure you came along, uh, quietly. Really, I'm sorry. I only had a second to click off the homing device and pull you through the service door."

Whit looked around, a little less painfully this time, and saw the door. "A door off the sewer?"

Maxwell nodded and smiled again. "It's a beauty. You can't see it from above. And there's only a handful of maintenance people who know about it. That's one of the jobs I had before I went to Odyssey. We're actually still under the Campus Clock Tower. The cops are up there going crazy trying to figure out what happened to you, while we're safe here below." He wagged his eyebrows proudly.

"Clever. I suppose this means that Blackgaard is nearby? You two are working together to get this computer, right?" Whit looked down at it and was rewarded with a stab of pain. He winced again. "Ow."

Maxwell nodded. "Correct on the first." He shook his head. "Wrong on the second."

Whit's eyes narrowed. "Really?"

Maxwell squatted next to him. "Blackgaard's around, but I'm not working for him. Just the opposite. I've been trying to figure out a way to get back at him for all he did to me two years ago. And lo and behold, you drop in, so to speak."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that I have a little scheme that'll get us all what we want. But I need your help."

Whit scoffed. "My help? Why in the world would I want to help you? You caused a lot of trouble in Odyssey for everyone."

Richard's gaze dropped. "I know. But you saved my life, and I'd like to do you a favor in return—like helping Connie."

"If you're not working for Blackgaard, then how do you know about Connie—or any of this?"

Maxwell grinned. "Maybe I've been playing 'fly on the wall' for the last few weeks. And maybe Greg Kelly is a former acquaintance of mine who led me to Blackgaard. And maybe I've been following him. And maybe I saw Blackgaard nab Connie. And maybe I know where he took her. So maybe I can help."

"Those are a lot of maybes."

"Six, to be exact. But they all happen to be true." Maxwell stood up. "So, are you in?"

Whit tried to look up at him, but the move resulted in another stab of pain. "Why should I trust you?"

"You probably shouldn't, but then again, I'm the only one who knows where Connie is. If you and the feds wanna stumble around trying to find her, be my guest."

There was a long pause. Maxwell extended a hand to Whit, who looked at it for a moment and then heaved a frustrated sigh and clasped it. "I guess I don't have much of a choice."

Maxwell smirked and pulled him to his feet. "Now, now, don't be like that. Do it my way and we'll all be happy. You'll get Connie, I'll get Blackgaard, and the government might even get their computer back."

Whit looked him straight in the eyes. "What's your scheme?"



Phillips and Woody sat in the back of an agency van in an alley just off campus. That is, Woody sat. Phillips paced back and forth in the small space. "This isn't possible! He was there one second and gone

the next. Turn on the homing device again.”

Woody checked it. “It’s on, sir. No signal. It must not be working.”

“Or Whittaker turned it off. Blast! I knew I shouldn’t trust him!

Either he’s on some kind of mission that the agency won’t tell us about—” Phillips halted. A new idea struck him. “Or he’s working on his own.”

“Sir?”

“For all we know, he could be selling the secrets in the computer for himself, a double cross!”

Woody looked skeptical. “I’ll be very surprised if that proves to be true, sir.”

“Look, Whittaker wouldn’t take a chance with the girl’s life unless he was in cahoots with—”

The beep of the homing receiver interrupted Phillips’s theories. Woody checked the device. “Sir! The signal’s back on!”

Phillips plopped into a chair next to him. “Quick! Turn on the map!” Woody flicked a switch, and an overlay of the city appeared on the device. Phillips studied it intensely. “Where is he?”

Woody punched a few buttons. “Checking coordinates.”

“Hurry!”

“He’s in the warehouse district!”

Phillips barked at the driver. “Get moving!”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Blackgaard packed up the remaining papers from the warehouse office file and put Sasha in her carrying case. The cat hissed and growled. "Sorry, little one," Blackgaard cooed and then zipped up the case. The cat lapsed into silence. Blackgaard picked up the carrier, moved to the office door, and called out, "Pinky? Is everything set?"

The hulking brute appeared, wearing a suit rather than his clown costume, though he still had smudges of white grease paint on his neck, Connie noticed. "Yeah, boss," he intoned.

Blackgaard handed him Sasha's carrier. "Bring the car around."

Pinky nodded. "On my way." He disappeared into the warehouse.

Connie licked her lips nervously. "What are you gonna do?"

"Mr. Whittaker's disappearance makes me uneasy. Distance will provide peace of mind. Shall we go?"

She crossed her arms. "What if I say no?"

Blackgaard scowled. "Don't be such a child. Come along."

Connie sat. "You make me get in that car and you *will* be guilty of kidnapping. No loophole in the world can change that."

He turned diplomatic. "You misunderstand me, Connie. I only want to drop you off at your hotel."

"I'll walk, thank you."

"This is a very rough neighborhood. I insist on dropping you off."

His voice became stern. "Get in the car."

"No."

"Miss Kendall—"

Connie held up a hand. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

Blackgaard grabbed it and yanked her up from the chair. She gasped. "Listen to me, young lady!" he snapped. "I've wasted enough time toying with you! Now *get in the car!*"

A familiar voice echoed through the warehouse. "What's your hurry, Dr. Blackgaard?"

Blackgaard and Connie whipped around and saw Whit step into the warehouse doorway. Connie bolted toward him, relieved. "Whit—hey!"

Blackgaard grabbed her by the arm and pulled her close to him. "Not so fast, princess," he growled, positioning her as a shield between him and Whit. His thin fingers squeezed her bicep.

Connie winced. "Ow! You're hurting my arm!"

Whit lunged forward. "Blackgaard—I!"

"Stop!" Blackgaard bellowed. Whit did. Blackgaard smiled. "Well, well, well, John Avery Whittaker. Live and in person. Just stay by the door where I can see you." He looked beyond Whit out the door and called, "Pinky!"

Whit glanced at the door behind him and then turned back to Blackgaard. "Pinky? You mean, Pinky the clown?"

"Yes," Blackgaard sneered. He called again. "Pinky! Where is that dolt?"

Whit jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Waiting for you in the car, actually. He'd like to answer you, but . . . he's tied up at the moment."

Blackgaard chortled. "O-ho! You are the resourceful one, aren't you? Shall I assume you followed him here and that any moment the building will be swarming with police?"

"Assume what you like. I came for Connie."

"And you brought the computer."

Whit held it up. "Isn't it what you wanted?"

"*Still* want, Whittaker. Shall we call it an even trade? Perhaps we can finish the deal I had intended from the beginning. Before you disappeared."

Whit lowered the computer case and smiled. "Things have changed since then. We have another partner in this little arrangement."

"And who might that be?"

A voice from behind Blackgaard said, "Me, Your Excellency."

Blackgaard and Connie whipped around again as Richard Maxwell stepped into the light.

Blackgaard maneuvered Connie so that he could see both Whit and Maxwell. His eyes darted between them. "My, my!" he said with a chuckle. "This is turning into 'old home week.' Do you see who it is, Connie?"

"I see," she said, scowling. "Who else is gonna show up—Digger Digwillow?"

Blackgaard tightened his grip on her. "Dear, dear Richard. Did you escape from the detention center, or do they have you attached to a long leash?"

Maxwell shrugged. "I'm out for good behavior. Go figure." He inched closer to them.

Connie glanced at Whit nervously. "Uh, Whit? What's going on?"

Whit ignored her question. "You may as well give up, Blackgaard." He also inched closer toward them. Blackgaard smirked. "Give up? Oh, please. Because the two of you have me surrounded? What are you going to do, frighten me with rude expressions?"

"Funny," Maxwell said, moving closer. "You're a very funny man. But I can do better than that . . ." He reached behind his back and retrieved a revolver, which he leveled at them. "Like with this."

Whit froze. "Richard!"

Blackgaard pulled Connie closer and shook his head. "Oh, Richard. Is this what they taught you in jail?"

"Nah. I came up with this on my own."

Connie's eyes widened. "Um, Whit? H-he has a gun."

"Richard," Whit said sternly, "this was never part of our plan."

Maxwell glanced at him. "It wasn't a part of *your* plan. But it's been part of mine for two years. Two very long years of thinking about revenge."

Blackgaard scoffed. "It took you two *years* to come up with this idea?"

Maxwell stepped closer. "Go ahead, Doctor, be glib. But the gun is still pointed at you."

Blackgaard's expression hardened. "You'll have to shoot the girl first."

Maxwell shrugged nonchalantly again. "'Kay." He raised the gun higher.

"Richard!" Whit barked and stepped forward.

Connie held up her hands. They were shaking. "N-no, really, I don't want to get in anyone's way."

Blackgaard's eyes narrowed. "It seems prison has hardened you, Richard."

"Not prison—*you*. Remember? You were the one who taught me not to let anyone get in the way of what I want."

Connie's knees and voice now shook as well. "Uh, g-guys? Can we talk this out?" A tear trickled down her cheek.

Maxwell inched closer, eyes locked on Blackgaard's. "With or without her, you and I have a score to settle."

"Don't do it, Richard!" Whit pleaded.

Blackgaard's deep baritone voice turned smooth and persuasive. "I can't believe you don't care for this girl, Richard. You're not that callous, that hard . . . look at her . . ." Maxwell

glanced down at Connie. Her whole body trembled, her face was white with fear, and tears now streamed down her face.

Blackgaard inched her closer to Maxwell. “So scared . . . so vulnerable . . . so . . . *diverting!*” He pushed Connie right into Maxwell, and they both tumbled into some empty wooden crates. Wood splintered, Connie shrieked, Whit rushed to them, everyone talked at once, and chaos reigned.

“Don’t push!”

“Connie—get off of me!”

“Watch the gun, Richard!”

“Get out of the way!”

“Careful where you point that thing!”

“What are you doing?”

“Let go, Richard!”

“Connie, are you all right?”

As the three of them scrambled about, Blackgaard raced to a ladder attached to a nearby wall and shinnied up it like a lemur scaling a tree for a piece of fruit. Once at the top, he laughed uproariously, and it echoed throughout the warehouse.

Whit, Connie, and Richard looked up at him. He nodded benevolently. “Love to stay and chat, but you know the electronics business—rush, rush, rush! That’s why I’ve had these little escape hatches installed! Just push a button and—” He pressed it.

There was a loud electronic zap, the lights flickered, and Blackgaard screamed!

“AAAAAAAHHH!”

His hand dropped, his body went limp, and he plummeted into a stack of empty boxes.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



“Hey—the hatch didn’t work!”

Connie pulled half a shattered crate off her legs with one hand and pushed Richard Maxwell away with the other hand. Whit helped her to her feet. Maxwell also extricated himself from the remains of a crate, rolled over, and hopped up. “That’s right, none of them will.”

“Ooooooooo . . .” Blackgaard groaned, clambered out of the pile of empty boxes, and stood unsteadily. His normally dapper appearance was now a wreck. His slicked-back, jet-black hair was mussed and sticking out. His frock coat was torn in several places, and his waistcoat was askew. He was bruised, bleeding from scrapes on his forehead and hands, sweating profusely, and breathing hard. And his habitually pointy Vandyck was smushed against his chin.

Maxwell dashed over to him and said, “Feeble, Doctor, very feeble. I didn’t work for you all those months without learning a few things—like how to sabotage your remote-control gizmos.” He leveled the gun at Blackgaard’s chest once again. “You’re not going anywhere.”

Blackgaard tried to smile warmly, but the best he could do was a sort of grimace. “Let’s be reasonable, Richard.” His smooth baritone now cracked and croaked. “Surely there’s something we can

negotiate.”

“Getting revenge on you was never negotiable,” Maxwell growled through gritted teeth. “You left me to die in a fire, remember?”

Blackgaard put his hand to his chest. “Poor judgment on my part. What do you want?”

Maxwell shook his head. “Not so fast.” He glanced at Whit and Connie. “You two, get outta here.”

Whit stepped toward him, and Connie followed and grabbed Whit’s sleeve, stopping him. “I’d like nothing better, Richard,” she said sympathetically. “But I’ve gotta tell you, I think it’s pretty dumb to throw away the rest of your life just for revenge.”

Whit nodded. “She’s right, Richard.”

“Actually, they *both* are—!” Blackgaard squawked.

Maxwell cut him off. “Quiet!” He glanced back at Whit and Connie. “Thanks for your concern. Now, both of you, get *out* of here!”

Connie tugged at Whit’s sleeve. “Come on, Whit. We’d better go.”

Whit didn’t budge. “No.”

Maxwell glared at him. “I’m not kidding around, Whittaker. You and Connie get out of here—*now*!”

Whit stood his ground. “I’m not going anywhere until you put that gun away.”

“F-forgive me for interrupting,” Blackgaard simpered, “b-but I’m terribly uncomfortable having that gun pointed at me while you talk.”

Maxwell raised it higher. “Don’t worry, it won’t be pointed for long.”

Blackgaard stooped and held out his hands. “What do you want, Richard? Tell me!”

Maxwell smirked. “Make me an offer. Just so I can hear it.”

“Yes! Yes!” Blackgaard nodded profusely. “I have money, property! You could live anywhere in the world! Tell me where you want to go. Tell me what you would enjoy. Name it!”

Maxwell's eyes narrowed. "You—on your knees."

Blackgaard's brow furrowed. "What?"

"Get down on your knees!"

"A-a-all right! If you wish." With some effort, Blackgaard knelt.

Whit inched closer. "Richard. Stop this. Stop this now."

Maxwell kept his eyes fixed on Blackgaard. "Stay out of it, Whittaker."

Blackgaard looked up at Maxwell and swallowed. "I—I'm on my knees. What do you want?"

"I want you to beg for your life."

Blackgaard's eyes widened and his mouth opened. "Uh . . ."

"Richard—" Connie whispered compassionately.

"*Beg!*" Maxwell shouted.

Blackgaard raised his hands and lowered his head. "D-don't . . . hurt me, Richard . . . Please."

Maxwell scoffed. "You can do better than that!"

Blackgaard bowed lower and raised his arms higher. "P-please don't hurt me. I'll do anything you want, but please, don't hurt me!"

"Say you're sorry."

"I—I'm sorry. I'm sorry you had to spend two years in the detention center." He bowed all the way to the floor, his hands stretched out to Maxwell. "I'll . . . I'll make it up to you somehow . . ." He groveled, whimpering, sniveling. "Please . . . Just put the gun away . . . whatever you want . . . *please* . . ."

Whit moved slowly between Maxwell and Blackgaard. "Is this what you wanted, Richard? Is this the revenge? How does it taste?? Was it worth two years?"

"Get out of the way."

"Don't you understand? When you go out for revenge, you've got to dig *two* graves—one for the person you're after, and one for yourself."

"You're in the line of fire!"

"That's right," Whit said defiantly. "And this is where I'll stay until you put the gun away." He reached out to Maxwell. "Richard, there's no such thing as revenge. Not really. It never replaces what you lost. It never restores. It doesn't even satisfy. You're out of the detention center. You have your whole life ahead of you. Please, give me the gun."

"Listen to him, Richard!" Blackgaard said frantically. "For pity's sake, *listen to him!*"

Maxwell glanced from Blackgaard to Whit to Connie. Her face was ashen, and she was still trembling. His jaw hardened, and he looked back at Blackgaard. "No. You've asked for this. Look at me!"

Blackgaard slowly sat up, terrified.

Maxwell pointed the gun straight at his face. "Get out of my way, Whittaker, or I'll shoot!"

"Richard!" Connie pleaded.

"Ready . . ."

Whit looked at Maxwell coolly. "I'm not moving."

"Aim . . ."

"Somebody stop him!" Blackgaard bawled. "*Please!*"

Connie lurched forward and grabbed Whit's sleeve again. "Whit, get out of the way!"

"Connie! Let go of my arm!"

"Fire!"

In rapid succession, Connie screamed, "Whit!" and pulled at him with all her might.

He yelled, "Connie!" as he tumbled to the floor with her.

Blackgaard wailed, "Nooooo!"

Maxwell fired, pulling the trigger rapidly—resulting in a jet stream of water bursting from the gun nozzle and pelting Blackgaard's face, soaking him. He spluttered and fell over backward. "Uuubbb-bblluubb!"

Maxwell laughed. "You know, sometimes you guys can be real drips."

Whit and Connie stared, mouths agape. "It's . . . water!" Whit exclaimed.

Connie looked at Maxwell. "A . . . water gun?"

He grinned. "Sure. You think I'd wreck my life on account of *this* creep?"

Whit fell back on the floor and heaved a huge sigh of relief. "Oh . . . thank God!"

"I didn't even want to risk breaking parole by getting a real gun. It's not worth it," Maxwell added, squirting some water from the nozzle into his mouth. He swallowed. "Pretty funny, huh?"

Connie rolled her eyes and also fell back on the floor. "Oh, yeah . . . a laugh riot."

Blackgaard wiped his face with his coat sleeve and glared at Maxwell, livid. "A water gun? A WATER GUN? AAAARRGH!" He shot up, bowled over Maxwell, vaulted over Whit and Connie, and dashed for the rear exit.

The three spoke all at once: "Hey!" "He's getting away!" "He's heading out the back!"

At the rear door, Blackgaard turned and shouted at them. "You haven't seen the last of me!" He pointed a long, thin finger at each of them. "*None of you!*" He kicked open the door, rushed out through it, and slammed it shut behind him.

Connie sighed. "They always have to have the last word."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Whit sat up. "Wait—listen!"

Outside, a siren approached, tires screeched, and car doors slammed. Seconds later, Agent Phillips and Woody burst through the front entrance, guns drawn.

"Great timing." Maxwell rolled his eyes.

Whit and Connie got to their feet. Phillips shouted, "Nobody move! Everybody against the wall! You're all under arrest for conspiracy, treason, and espionage!"

He and Woody herded them to the wall, and Phillips commandeered Maxwell's squirt gun. As they walked, Whit, Connie, and Maxwell all began talking at once, protesting their innocence. Finally, Whit managed to quiet down the others and said to Phillips, "You have the wrong people. The man you want just ran out the back door."

Phillips scoffed. "Sure, he did. Woody, check it out."

"Yes, sir!" He ran out the back.

Phillips put Maxwell's squirt gun under his arm and fished the handcuff key from his coat pocket. "Here's the key, Whittaker. The computer—off your wrist."

Whit took the key and began working the cuffs. "Whatever you say."

Phillips backed up to cover them all. "I'm not taking any more chances. You thought you could give me the slip at the college, did you?"

"He *did* give you the slip," Maxwell retorted.

"Quiet, you!"

Whit scowled at Phillips. "If I wanted to give you the slip, why did I turn on the homing device so you'd find us here?"

"Another ploy to throw us off. I'm taking you all in."

Connie tossed up her hands. "Good grief! I'm never going to get to see the Sears Tower!"

"You can count on that!" Phillips snapped. "You'll spend the rest of your trip answering a lot of questions."

Maxwell smiled slyly. "Not as many as *you* have to answer."

Phillips's brow furrowed. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't give him the computer, Mr. Whittaker," Maxwell said calmly.

Phillips glared at him. "You'd better stay out of this, young man! You're already in a lot of trouble."

Maxwell shrugged. "Yeah? Join the crowd."

Whit finally unlocked the cuffs, which opened with a loud *click*. But he held on to the computer and looked at Maxwell. "Richard, what's going on?"

"Remember I told you I've been following Blackgaard for the past few weeks? Well, sitting outside this warehouse let me see a lot of the people he met with."

"Yes?"

Maxwell nodded at Phillips. "Surprise, surprise."

Connie rolled her eyes. "No, not *another* surprise . . ."

"I thought Agent Phillips here looked familiar," Maxwell continued. "He's been coming and going quite a lot. Haven't you, Agent Phillips?"

Phillips began to sweat. "I—I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't you?" Maxwell pressed. "You and Blackgaard have been pretty chummy up until today. That's how he knew when to get the computer from the courier!"

Whit turned to Phillips, who pointed two guns at them. "All right, nobody move!"

"Not again . . ." Connie whimpered.

Maxwell nodded at the pistol in Phillips's left hand. "That's my water gun."

Phillips glanced at it and tossed it away roughly. "Yeah, but *this* one isn't. Nobody move. Whittaker, the computer! *Now!*"

Whit took a breath. "If you insist." He handed the computer over to Phillips.

Connie huffed. "After all this, we're *still* losing the computer to the bad guys?!"

Phillips yanked the computer case out of Whit's hand. "It was so simple. But, no, you two had to mess it all up. A small fortune. That's what I'll get for this computer."

Whit's eyes narrowed. "I had a feeling something was wrong. Most government agents aren't as high strung as you are."

"High strung?" yelled Phillips. "Who's high strung?"

"Can I assume you'll be meeting up with Blackgaard later?"

Phillips smirked and stepped back, gun still trained on them. "Assume what you want. Tell Woody I'm sorry I had to rush off." He snickered. "*Arrivederci, amigos!*" He guffawed and ran out of the front entrance. They heard the car door open and slam shut, the engine start, and the car peel off, tires squealing.

Connie put her hand to her head. "Good grief! I need to sit down for a minute!" She moved to a nearby chair and plopped down in it.

Whit followed. "Are you all right, Connie?"

"Are you kidding? I don't get *any* of this! I mean, some of the bad guys turned out to be good guys, and the good guy was bad, and the gun was a water pistol, and . . . I'm all confused!"

Whit chuckled. "Well, let's go back to the hotel. I'll explain it all to you there."

"The hotel?" Connie exclaimed. "How can you be so casual? Blackgaard's escaped, and Phillips got away with the computer!"

Maxwell joined them, grinning. "Welllll, maybe . . ."

Whit glanced at him and also smiled. "And then again, maybe not."



A few hours later, Blackgaard and Phillips stood over a table in a fleabag room in a run-down hotel somewhere in the wilds of Illinois. Phillips fiddled with the computer case, trying to open it, but he was all thumbs. Blackgaard scowled. "Hurry up, you dunderhead!"

"I'm hurrying! I'm hurrying!" Phillips finally managed to free the computer. He tossed the case on the floor. "There! It's out!"

Blackgaard licked his lips hungrily. "Power it up! Let us gaze fondly upon the new source of our untold wealth."

Phillips lifted the lid and punched the "on" button. The laptop instantly responded with beeps, buzzes, and whirrs, and the Department of Defense emblem appeared on the screen. "Sounds healthy. Yeah, there's the DoD main screen and emblem, and—" He stopped. The screen dissolved into a different, and unexpected, image. Phillips frowned. "Wait a minute! What's all this?"

The new image was of Maxwell and Whit. Maxwell waved at them. "Hi there, Richard Maxwell here."

"And John Whittaker, as well."

Blackgaard's eyes bugged out at them. "*What?*"

Maxwell continued. "Sorry to disappoint you, but by turning on this computer, you actually *erased* everything that's on it. Except this message, of course."

Whit smiled. "A little precaution in case our plan didn't work. Better the government loses its secrets completely than to lose them to you."

Maxwell piped back in. "Hope you enjoy the message! Have a nice day!" He started laughing, and Whit joined him.

Phillips's jaw dropped. "Ruined . . . totally ruined . . ."

Blackgaard's eyes narrowed. "Laugh now, Whittaker, but I'm not finished with you," he growled. "Not by a long shot."

Whit and Maxwell continued to laugh uproariously.

PREVIEW OF BOOK SIX



“What is *this*?”

Filby frowned as he sat in the communications van and watched the young man and the old one laugh at him from the computer screen. Blackgaard sat next to him and gazed at the screen benignly, gently stroking Sasha between her ears. She purred in his lap contentedly. The three of them were alone in the van. “It’s the American Department of Defense computer you wanted—as ordered.”

“What does this young man mean, the contents are *erased*?”

“Richard’s statement speaks for itself.” Blackgaard cocked his head slightly. “Are you unfamiliar with the term?”

“You mean, there’s *nothing* on here but this video?”

“Ah! Then you *are* familiar with the term.”

Filby slapped shut the laptop lid. “What good does a computer with no programs do us?!” he snarled.

“Not much, I would imagine.”

Filby exploded. “*Is this some kind of joke?*”

Sasha winced, but Blackgaard smiled. “Not at all. It is a completed mission. I followed your orders to the letter—bring this computer to you, which I have done.” Blackgaard shrugged. “Your

orders said nothing about bringing any *programs* on the computer.”

Filby stabbed a finger at him. “You took them, didn’t you? You’re keeping them to sell yourself!”

Blackgaard shook his head. “Afraid not, though your American contact tried mightily to persuade me to do so.”

“Where is Phillips?”

“Fleeing for his life, I’d say. He is a traitor, after all. Perhaps he’s with Pinky.”

“We’ve recovered Pinky. He has been . . . reassigned.”

Blackgaard’s eyebrows rose. “Has he now? Good for him! I know we didn’t get along at first, but we ended up working very well together.” He frowned. “Too bad we can’t partner on my next assignment.”

“*Next* assignment?”

“Why, yes,” said Blackgaard earnestly, “for European Security. I am *in*, aren’t I?”

Filby snorted so loudly he nearly choked. “You think I’m going to bring you into the agency after the way you botched this assignment? Why on earth would I do that?”

At that moment, Blackgaard’s cell phone rang. He set Sasha gently on a nearby counter and held up a finger to Filby. “Hold on one moment. I need to take this.” He retrieved his phone from his coat pocket, flipped it open, and put it to his ear. “Blackgaard. Ah, Hakim! How lovely to hear from you! What’s the latest? . . . Uh-huh! . . . Mustafa has agreed—Red Scorpion will meet me! Well, that is good news, indeed! Please hold for a moment . . .”

He punched the hold button on his phone, snapped it shut, and reached for Sasha, stroking her fur absently. “You know, Filby, I keep wondering why you had an asset who was on the take, and you didn’t tell me about it. I mean, I’d hate to think you’re so incompetent that you didn’t *know* Phillips was going to double-cross you, but if you *did* know . . .” He locked eyes with Filby. “Why would you keep something like that to yourself?”

Filby said nothing, just glared at him.

After a long moment, Blackgaard waggled his phone. "Well? Hakim is waiting. Do I meet Red Scorpion as an agent . . . or as an independent contractor?"

The muscles in Filby's jaw twitched, and his lips pressed thin against his teeth. At last, he jerked his head away and snarled, "Fine! You're in!"

Blackgaard smiled, took a breath, flipped open his phone, and said, "So sorry to keep you waiting, Hakim, my friend. Tell Mustafa I will be honored to meet with him and Red Scorpion as soon as possible."